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HIST 3173: The Penn Slavery Project

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Creating, Keeping, and Losing Black Spaces: Lebanon and Olive Cemeteries in 19th Century Philadelphia

The Lebanon Cemetery, founded in January 1849, was the first African American private cemetery in Philadelphia. Founded by Jacob White, Sr. on the corner of 19th Street and Snyder Avenue, the cemetery offered the promise of a Black cemetery space separate from the burial grounds at almshouses that by the mid-19th Century were plagued by body-snatching from medical schools like Penn and Jefferson. One month later, another Black elite, Stephen Smith, founded the Mount Olive Cemetery, also known as Olive, in upper West Philadelphia. The close timing of the establishment of the two cemeteries begs investigation. It also raises a host of related questions. Why 1849? What relationship did Smith have with White? Why the sudden investment in private Black burial spaces? To attempt to answer them, I sought primary source documents on Lebanon and Olive cemeteries and secondary sources to situate the Black elite interaction that is central. However, I did not arrive at this inquiry in a vacuum. Scott Wilds, John Pollack, and Jim Duffin were invaluable resources as I bounced between topics and navigated which sources to try, and which were dead ends. I am grateful for their support. Dr. Aaron Wunsch was a critical resource. I am thankful for how generous he was with his time. Dr. Wunsch's enormous knowledge of Olive and Lebanon brought together the various strands of my research and gave me the answers I was

looking for. Finally, I am sincerely appreciative of Dr. Kathleen Brown's guidance through every step of the brainstorming and research process.

This inquiry began with an interest in the history and living memory of the Lebanon Cemetery and evolved into an examination of the cemeteries' founding. Thomas Keels' work, *Philadelphia Graveyards and Cemeteries* and *Wicked Philadelphia: Sin in the City of Brotherly Love* provided clues and explained the eventual demise of the cemeteries, occurring in 1903 for Lebanon and 1923 for Olive. These findings, like many others, are more in line with my initial desire to provide a history of the place of Lebanon, from founding to closing. The story of Lebanon is a story of self-determination, resilience, and struggle. Keels provided me with a basic knowledge of the cemetery's arc. The secondary literature was scarcer with regard to Mount Olive. Armed with an understanding of what the cemetery meant and means to Black Philadelphians, I sought to narrow my search with primary sources to answer my essential research question. My primary sources come from the Leon Gardiner Collection at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The Gardiner Collection contains a large file of documents related to the operation of Lebanon Cemetery, and includes the personal records of its founder, Jacob White, Sr. The collection contains well over one hundred documents, including notes, copies of death certificates, printed material, and correspondence.

The Cemeteries' Founding

Jacob White Sr. was born in Kensington in 1806. His profession listed as "barber" in the 1950 census, he also worked as a bleeder, dentist, store owner, and unlicensed physician.[1] He

[1] U.S. Census Bureau; 1850 Pennsylvania Census, "familysearch.org," page 425, rows 22-34, https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HT6PD7MTL?i=424&cc=1401638&personaUrl=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1% 3A1%3AM4CX-63V.

additionally bought and sold homes in Philadelphia. An accomplished entrepreneur, White was prominent in the Black community. He co-founded several Philadelphia organizations to promote racial justice, including the Gilbert Lyceum, a literary society; the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee, aiding people trying to escape slavery; and the Committee to Recruit Colored Troops in the Civil War. According to the 1850 Census records, he and his family lived in the Fourth Ward of Northern Liberties, shown in the northwest on Figure 1. He lived with his wife, Elizabeth (née Miller), and ten children, as well as Elizabeth's mother and sister, Leah (77) and Rachel (33).[2] In 1847, White purchased eleven acres on 19th Street and Snyder Avenue. He transformed the property into Lebanon over the next two years before opening it in 1849. At the time of its founding, White was active in the First African Presbyterian Church as President of the Board of Trustees and superintendent of its Sunday school.[3]

Stephen Smith was born around 1795 into slavery near Harrisburg in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania. Smith was indentured to General Thomas Boude in 1801 when he was four or five years old. As Smith approached adulthood, Boude charged Smith with managing his entire lumber business. In 1816, Smith borrowed $50 from Boude, worth $1,055.71 in 2022 dollars, to purchase his freedom.[4] That same year, Smith married Harriet Lee, a domestic servant from the Jonathan Mifflin home. They had no children. Stephen Smith, a freeman, entered the lumber business himself. In 1820, his one-and-a-half lots were valued at $300, or $7,633.62 in 2022 dollars. Thirteen years later, he owned six houses and lots worth $3,000, or $76,336.15 in 2022 dollars, plus stocks and bonds of equal value, a "pleasure carriage," a horse, and a cow.[5] His lumber yard

[2] Ibid.
[3] Berhanu, "White, Jacob C., Sr.," Temple University Libraries.
[4] Webster, "officialdata.org," https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1816? amount=50.
[5] Ibid.

became one of the most prominent on the Susquehanna River. In 1835, he received a threatening anonymous letter, probably from a competing white. Smith was targeted in the 1834-35 race riot in Columbia, Pennsylvania. He moved to Philadelphia in 1840 to a home next to his business partner, William Whipper, on 919 Lombard Street. He founded the Olive Cemetery nine years later. Smith lived on Lombard Street with his wife until his death in 1873.

Figure 1: Homes of White and Smith, Significant Concentrations of Black Philadelphians, and Lebanon and Olive Cemeteries.[6]

[6] Compiled information including Black demographics in Hershberg in "Urban Transition Historical GIS Project," Brown University, https://s4.ad.brown.edu/Projects/UTP2/phi.htm. White's House in U.S. Census Bureau; 1850 Pennsylvania

After my review of the documents at the Gardiner collection, I relied on secondary sources to contextualize what I found. The readings draw together broad trends and themes that may explain the founding of the two cemeteries; however, no conclusive evidence has emerged. In addition to Keels, the secondary sources I read include Gary Nash's *Forging Freedom* and Julie Winch's *Philadelphia's Black Elite.* While useful in providing context for the Philadelphia Black community's formation and elite, the books did not provide me with concrete ties to Lebanon and Olive's formation. How Jacob White Sr. and Stephen Smith chose nearly the exact same moment—January and February 1849—was not explained by materials in the Gardiner Collection and the secondary source material I examined. Efforts to locate primary source documents detailing Olive Cemetery's operation were unsuccessful.

The founding of Lebanon and Olive cemeteries can therefore be understood structurally and incidentally. The structural analysis of the founding I will offer below establishes that there were significant incentives and great need for Black-owned private cemeteries in Philadelphia. It speaks to the situation of Black Philadelphians and the realities with which they struggled. The incident of their founding—what impelled Stephen Smith and Jacob White Sr. to found the cemeteries when they did—is a question that deserves further attention. I do not offer an answer here.

In nineteenth-century Philadelphia, body snatching was a commonplace occurrence. Given the historical prevalence of the practice, 1849 is a peculiarly late date to claim the first two Black-owned private cemeteries in Philadelphia. The majority of Black Philadelphians lacked secure resting places well before the mid-19th Century. At the time of their founding, the Free African

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Census, "familysearch.org." Smith's House in "Smith-Whipper Houses," Philadelphia Historical Commission, https://www.phila.gov/ media/20220324130114/919-21-Lombard-St-nomination.pdf.

Society offered burials for poor and sick Black Philadelphians, but with only a few plots. Two churches offered resting places for the community: Allen's Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church and Jone's African Episcopal Church of Saint Thomas.[7] Outside of these options, Black members of non-Black churches could sometimes be laid to rest in their churchyards, but not without facing the protests of white church members. Almshouses provided the bulk of the remaining burial plots.

Body snatching made these almshouses dangerous places for Black Philadelphians to lay their loved ones to rest. In 1765, William Shippen, the first professor of anatomy at the University of Pennsylvania, sparked public protest from Black Philadelphians when his engagement in the practice was revealed. Body snatching continued well into the 1840s, from the Philadelphia City Almshouse to the Blockley Almshouse. Members of the Guardians of the Poor, the board in charge of the administration of Blockley, remarked in 1845 "[t]hat it occasions dread and anxiety in the minds of some of the inmates of this House, is a well-known fact . . . and to be buried elsewhere is sometimes asked as the last and greatest favor."[8] Fear of body snatching was prominent among Black and poor Philadelphians. The practice, owing to a lack of easily accessible cadavers, was practiced routinely by Jefferson and Penn medical schools since the time of Shippen. It is a motive for their founding, but a perennial condition rather than proximate cause.

In the context of limited burial sites and rampant body snatching, Olive and Lebanon were born. The reason for the year 1849 comes to the fore when taken in context of the Panic of 1837. By the late 1840s, the city was recovering from the economic downturn. Indeed, Keels

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[7] Keels, "Philadelphia Graveyards and Cemeteries," 78.
[8] McLeary, "The Curious Case of Body Snatching at Lebanon Cemetery."

associates the founding of the cemeteries primarily with the financial incentives of Stephen Smith, the founder of Olive, and White, the father of Lebanon.[9] Each sought to capitalize on Black demand for secure burial spaces. Attempts to locate the land records of Lebanon and Olive before purchase were unsuccessful. More research on the economic circumstances of the cemeteries' purchases is warranted; however, the general picture is clear. Jacob White Senior and Stephen Smith became quite wealthy as a result of founding the cemeteries. Smith, born into slavery, became one of the wealthiest Black men in America.[10] The clear impetus for the cemetery foundings for both men was financial.

For-profit cemetery models contributed to the founding of Lebanon and Olive. The for-profit cemetery model was pioneered in the United States in Philadelphia. While such models "proliferated in parts of Britain" during the early 19th Century, non-charitable corporate structures typically "met stiff opposition" in the United States.[11] The for-profit models of the Woodlands, Laurel Hill, and Monument Cemeteries—all of which survived the Panic of 1837—provided a unique opportunity at moneymaking. The model of white-owned cemeteries turned for-profit businesses gave both men—investors looking to increase their capital—a lucrative opportunity.[12] Having survived economic headwinds while continuing to deliver profits to their shareholders, private, for-profit cemeteries were a new invention and one the Black community had in especially high demand.

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[9] Keels, "Philadelphia Graveyards and Cemeteries," 78.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Wunsch, "Parceling the Picturesque," 97.
[12] Ibid.

Later Years and Closure

Notwithstanding the cemetery's founding, intended to prevent body snatching, the practice continued in the cemetery. In 1887, three men were ambushed by armed journalists and arrested on a body-snatching trip to Lebanon. It was revealed that the men delivered cadavers to Dr. William Forbes, a celebrated professor of anatomy at Jefferson Medical College. Due to public pressure from Philadelphia's Black community, Forbes was arrested and tried for conspiracy, but was acquitted on the grounds that he had no idea where the bodies had come from. The superintendent of Lebanon, complicit in the scandal, served jail time. The other two men were laborers who dug up the bodies and received more lenient sentences. In the testimony, the defendants revealed that they plundered Lebanon routinely, sometimes stealing bodies before burial services, admitting in court that loved ones gathered around empty caskets. Dr. Forbes testified that he never questioned why his cadavers were Black and could not explain why the men had keys to the Jefferson College dissecting room.[13]

The case was publicized across the country as a victory for an innocent medical hero. Today, it demonstrates the pervasive immunity of the Philly medical establishment from legal repercussions for body snatching, from Shippen to Forbes. It also elucidates the vulnerability of spaces like Lebanon to the phenomena they were founded to prevent. A space for deceased Black residents to rest in peace, Lebanon was nonetheless prey to the same pressures that had made it necessary to found Black cemeteries in the first place.

Lebanon Cemetery closed in 1903 after interments were forbidden by the Philadelphia Department of Health. The cemetery was dilapidated at the time of its closure;[14] however, the

[13] Keels, "Wicked Philadelphia," 44.
[14] Keels, "Philadelphia Graveyards and Cemeteries," 65.

extent of its threat to public health was largely determined by the Philadelphia Board of Health, which decided in January 1901 to suspend interments at the cemetery. Dr. Aaron Wunsch agrees with Keels that the cemeteries were in dilapidated condition, a fact corroborated by the cemeteries' pricing, ranging from $5-10 while equivalent plots at white cemeteries were typically around $100.[15] The Gardiner Collection includes documents mentioning "financial difficulties" repeatedly, including a note dated March 15, 1873, wherein the Board of Managers levied a $0.50 tax on each lot to meet the "extraordinary expenses of last year."[16]

Cash-strapped, Lebanon struggled as the first private Black cemetery. Keels discusses city laws passed in the 1870s to declare neglected graveyards a public nuisance and order their removal, restrict the opening of new cemeteries in built-up areas, and open or widen streets through existing cemeteries.[17] The Sanitary Movement that gained popularity throughout the middle of the 19th Century along with the cemetery's strained finances, in the context of Philly's recently-passed public health laws, tipped the balance towards closure. Lebanon and Olive, with strained purse strings, faced overcrowding and dilapidation, and was ripe for accusations that miasma, or "bad air," pervaded their grounds.

[15] Aaron Wunsch (Professor of History, Weitzman School of Design) in discussion with the author, December 8, 2022.
[16] Jacob C. White, Jr. Board of Managers Meeting Minutes, 1873.
[17] Keels, "Philadelphia Graveyards and Cemeteries," 74.

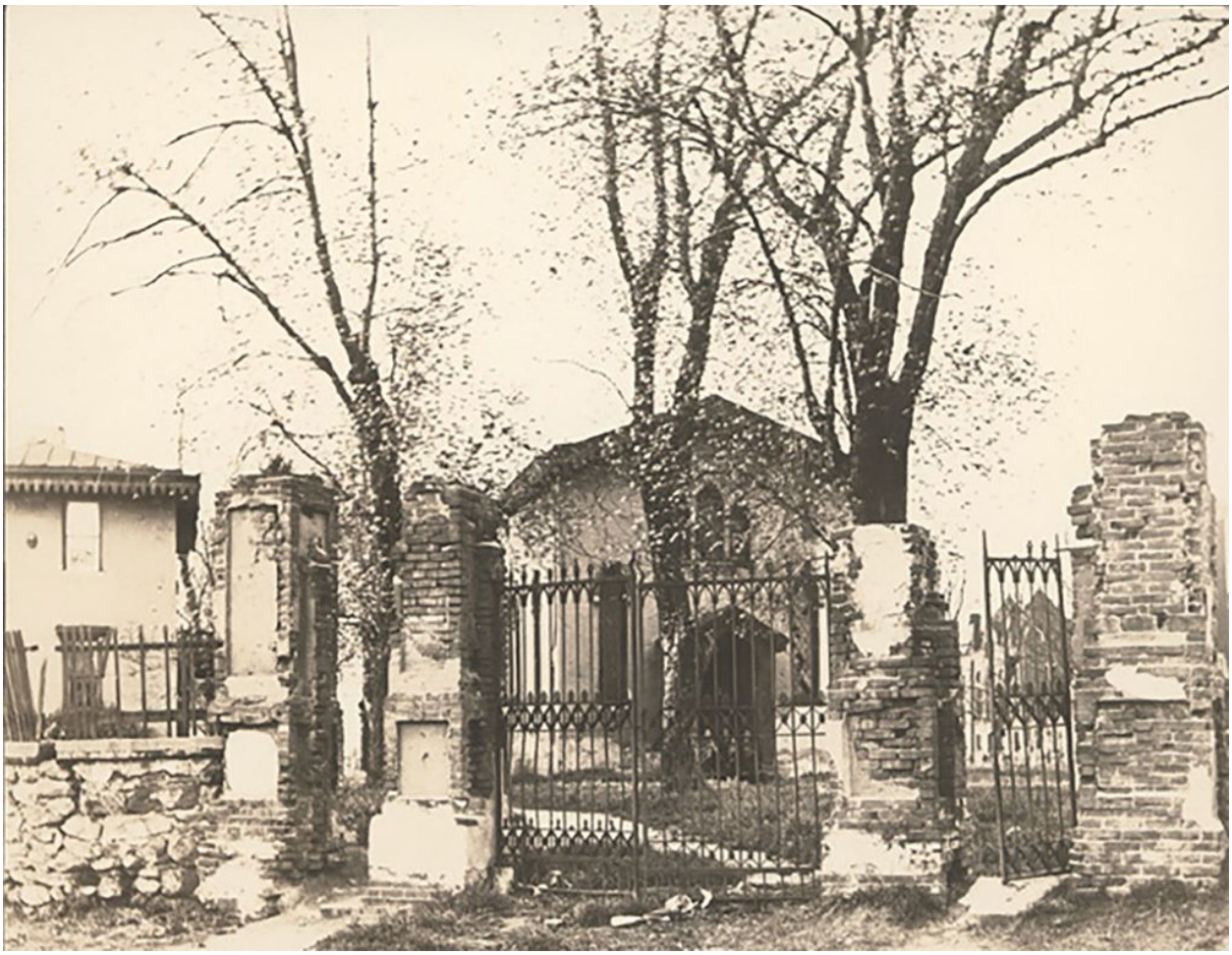

Figure 2: Olive Cemetery's condition after its closure, 1923.[18]

Jacob White Jr. expressed in a letter to Esther Rees on October 26, 1901, his belief that the city "has been thinking of cutting 19th Street and Snyder Ave. through [Lebanon] for some years. It is still thinking of doing so."[19] White believed the vultures were circling overhead, and for good reason. Lebanon was ultimately closed, and 19th and Snyder were redirected through the heart of it. There is truth to both White's and the city's narratives. The city's desire to redirect streets through Lebanon, along with the cemetery's critical condition, are parallel truths.

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[18] "Olive Cemetery," FindAGrave.com, https://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/2672577/ olive-cemetery-%28defunct%29.
[19] Jacob Clement White Jr., Letter to Esther Rees, 1901.

Philadelphia businesspeople had been eyeing Lebanon before its closure. A letter dated October 27, 1896, from Thaddeus Manning, an attorney for "syndicate"—three Philadelphia industrialists—offered to purchase Lebanon, with no price disclosed in the letter.[20] Manning details a scheme to move the bodies to Merion Cemetery and proposes dates for the buyer to visit the property, as well as for Jacob White Jr. to inspect Merion. Apparently White declined. The city closed the cemetery within ten years of the offer. Where Lebanon did not go by choice, it went by force.

The prior attempt to acquire Lebanon points to the role of industrialization in the cemeteries' closures. They closed their doors due, in large part, to rapid urbanization. Serene rural cemeteries in 1849, Lebanon was, by 1903, in the heart of commercially-developed Philadelphia, and by 1923 the more remote Olive was in the thick of urbanizing West Philly. Part of Olive would become a housing complex immediately after its closure.[21] Development pressures across the country gave cities and states the power to acquire and obliterate cemeteries.[22] Philadelphia passed laws in the 1870s to treat battered, overcrowded cemeteries as health threats. In 1903, those interred at Lebanon were moved to Eden Cemetery in Collingdale, Pennsylvania, right outside of city bounds. Lot holders were given one last chance to claim the bodies of their loved ones, with the option to request that they be moved to a different site. If no one claimed their bodies, those laid to rest at Lebanon had their monuments trashed and their remains claimed by the court and

[20] Thaddeus Manning, Letter to Jacob White, Jr., 1896.
[21] Aaron Wunsch (Professor of History, Weitzman School of Design) in discussion with the author, December 8, 2022.
[22] Keels, "Philadelphia Graveyards and Cemeteries," 78.

moved to "court-apportioned sites."[23] Transfers were supposed to be solemn and respectful, but "political corruption and ineptitude often made a ghoulish mockery of the process."[24]

Future Work

The Leon Gardiner collection at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP) contains documents including personal records of cemetery secretaries, financial records, and correspondence to and from personnel of Lebanon Cemetery. The Gardiner Collection provided the bulk of primary source material related to Lebanon Cemetery's operation and eventual closure. Its most useful contents for my purposes were personal letters from Jacob White Sr., the first secretary of Lebanon Cemetery, and his son, Jacob White Jr.

I reviewed the documents at HSP to uncover the origin story of the cemeteries. However, the material was far more useful for an analysis of the cemetery's finances and high-profile correspondences. For example, an 1865 letter to Jane Johnson—an enslaved woman who freed herself and her two sons in Philadelphia, sparking landmark abolitionist jurisprudence—demonstrates the extent to which the Gardiner Collection is a trove of connections between elite and influential Black Philadelphians. As the first private cemetery to serve the community, Lebanon was an important elite center and crossroads. The letters mainly document purchases. For example, the collection includes a six-dollar payment, $231.98 in 2022 dollars,[25] received from Sarah Ash for the coffin of a "Mrs. Powers." The primary sources in the Gardiner collection are a web of financial records, not explicitly relevant for the founding but worthy of further research.

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[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Webster, "officialdata.org," https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1816? amount=50.

The exact degree of overcrowding and sanitation at Lebanon cannot be settled by the records available in the Gardiner collection; however, the exact claims of the health department should be examined. Philadelphia's rapid urbanization made Lebanon's eleven-acre plot in a central location prime real estate. However, the history written by Keels may depend too heavily on the city's own testimony. The Philadelphia Board of Health had the most comprehensive information on the cleanliness of the cemetery, but it also had strong motives to relandscape the city. It is reasonable to believe it is not an entirely trustworthy source. We do not get a clear picture of how and whether these sanitary laws were equally applied, and a glimpse at the actual condition of the cemetery, primarily through records tracing overcrowding, could be worthwhile. The Gardiner Collection contains records to help answer these questions.

Discussion

It is possible that the close founding dates of Lebanon and Olive cemeteries was a coincidence. Indeed, the exact date might have been. Dr. Aaron Wunsch believes the cemeteries were competitors, making collaboration unlikely.[26] Two reasons suggest that coincidence is not the most probable. Firstly, the institutional reasons for the cemeteries' founding pre-date 1849—Black buried Philadelphians had been vulnerable to the city's medical schools at least since Shippen—raising more questions than answers as to why 1849 was chosen. Secondly, the revolutionary promise of these cemeteries—greater protection of Black remains endangered by respected and well-endowed medical schools—should make one raise their eyebrows at the sudden appearance of two. Their mutual founding was the culmination of institutional incentives traced

[26] Aaron Wunsch (Professor of History, Weitzman School of Design) in discussion with the author, December 8, 2022.

above. Two independent projects by White and Smith would therefore not be coincidence. The cemeteries were for-profit businesses responding to demand from Black Philadelphians. That demand pre-dated 1849, but two Black men with capital and looking to grow it after a recession gives us a non-coincidental answer.

The need of the Black community for the cemeteries makes for the primary impetus of their founding. The timing of the Panic of 1837 blotted out hopes for their founding until the mid-1840s, when the city began to recover. The one-month difference between their founding dates is still contingent on the two men deciding to act. Thus, the founding is explicable without being exact. The incident that led to their creation is still unclear. Cooperation between the two Black elites seems less likely than competition, and the idea of a private cemetery was by no means a novel secret. There had been a great need and a successful business model.

Two cemeteries founded to confront lack of Black spaces, to evade and respond to body-snatching, fell victim to it. Both cemeteries suffered chronic disrepair and overcrowding. However, the extent of their dilapidation cannot be separated from the lack of economic means of Black residents. The city then used this lack of means as a reason to pave streets through rows of gravestones. The story of Lebanon and Olive is the story of the construction and destruction of Black spaces. While the exact conception of the two cemeteries is a mystery, the circumstances that created them—need on the ground and money to be made from it—are clear. But while the cemeteries, especially Lebanon, are stories of struggle, they are also stories of resilience. The persistence of body-snatching behind Lebanon's fences shows the extent to which medical colleges like Penn and Jefferson would go where Black bodies were the least protected, whether in almshouses or Lebanon and Olive. They exploited their power and prestige to keep Black bodies under threat even after the Black communities mounted responses. Now the interred at both

cemeteries, despite an unfair and botched transfer, lay at rest at Eden. Founded in 1902, Eden is the oldest surviving Black cemetery in the United States. Lebanon and Olive represent Black responses to lack of space and protection. The resilience of Black Philadelphians facing threats to their bodies survives in Eden, where the stories of Lebanon and Olive now reside.

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