

# *I went to visit the grave of Henry Simmons on a September Saturday in 2020.*

The intensity of the summer heat had begun to abate, at least for a few days, and there was a low-pressure system coming in off the Gulf that weekend that had brought with it a mist, not quite drizzle, that hung over the northern part of the state. I made the drive up to Gainesville from Palm Beach the afternoon before, and that morning headed east to Hawthorne, Florida, where I knew Henry Simmons was buried. I hadn't looked at a map to find the cemetery, but figured Hawthorne wasn't that big and a cemetery wouldn't be hard to locate, and, in fact, it wasn't.

Cut out of the live oaks and palmettos on the east side of town, the cemetery was, like many small-town cemeteries I have known, laid out with lanes running straight through, intersected by other lanes that form a grid square, more-or-less, with paved ones going one direction, and the other direction cut through the grass. And in this cemetery, again, like many I have known in my native South, there was a clear delineation between this parceled grid and another, less organized one, behind it, separated by a row of trees and low, intermittent shrubs. That cemetery I knew, of course, was the Black section, that section where the sandy drive just made one loop through and came back further down the row of trees; where the monuments were



lower to the ground, rows less precise, trees and plantings scarcer, and grass higher than it was on the other side of the tree-row.

Since I had been introduced to the story of Henry Simmons on Yom Kippur almost exactly one year before, I had made contact with his nephew (his mother was Henry's sister), and through a series of conversations, he had told me Henry was buried with his parents in the town cemetery, but I had neglected to ask where. I didn't figure I needed to, small town cemeteries being what they are, and was up for the discovery. He would, I figured, be buried in this back part of the cemetery, so I parked my car, got out, and began walking among the stones, saying the family names out loud as I read them on the markers, an act I have done since childhood in a family who often visited cemeteries.

In the mist that wasn't quite a drizzle, I zig-zagged my way through the markers, looking for names that might sound familiar, and, eventually, I found



ones I knew. I recognized Henry's sister and I found a sister's in-laws, then another sister, and I knew if I found them—if this cemetery was anything like the ones I knew in the Deep South—then other family were nearby. And sure enough, after crossing the sandy lane again, I found Simmonses. And, catching my breath, I found Henry, right next to his mother, as his nephew had told me I would.

I have hunted in cemeteries countless times before, always in search of the dead who can't speak but who nonetheless seek to be found, so I was accustomed to the feeling of finding the gravestone that I had sought. I had spoken with Henry often in my heart, since I learned of his murder at the corner of South County Road and Barton Avenue, the land on which my church now sits, but that September morning was different; I wasn't quite sure what to say when I found this gravestone.

There are two markers at Henry's grave: a small concrete headpiece, and a larger, concrete pillow marker—identical to the one for his father, Hoyle (also called Hall)—atop the full concrete ledger covering of his grave, the latter painted white and weathered by the elements. Both markers are hand-incised, likely by a nail in wet concrete, with his name and birth and death months and years. The smaller, original marker also includes a line at the bottom that reads "World War I." He is buried at the feet of his mother, Nealy, who had died giving birth to Henry's young sibling in 1913.

There are no benches in that section of the cemetery, and I had neglected to bring a chair, and so, in the mist that wasn't a drizzle, I stood over Henry's grave, then crouched beside it a while, then stood again. I walked among his family, then returned to stand some more. There was much I had to say to Henry, and there was even more I'd like to have listened to, but this was mostly a one-way conversation, though I asked some questions for which there will never be answers.



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Never good at memorization, there's not much I can recite with ease, but prayers from the Burial of the Dead, the funeral service in *The Book of Common Prayer 1979*, have imprinted themselves in my head, having said their words at so many services of parishioners over the eight years of my priesthood. Their language is dignified and reverent and holy, and those words were on my lips as I stood over Henry's grave, prayers said by gravesides for centuries by the faithful in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection. And then more silence. And some talk just between Henry and me; some apologies for the cruelty of men, of white men like me, and the injustice of the world in which Henry lived and I live now. And I offered the same fatigued apology to Nealy, his mother, whose greatest fear for her children came true on June 7th, 1923. I prayed some more, but mostly just stood there in silence and the dripping that had moved toward drizzle by that point, because I figured it wasn't my place to say much anyway.

Because I believe that place is important and that we are tied to places in ways none of us can explain, sometimes tragically so, I had brought along four flowering branches of plumeria from the Bethesda campus, wrapped in wet paper towel from the day before and carried in a Ziploc bag, so I unwrapped the flowers and placed them on Henry's grave. I was pretty sure that no one from Palm Beach had ever ventured up to Alachua County to seek out Henry's grave, and I was therefore pretty sure that no one from Palm Beach had ever come to offer flowers at Henry's grave. I was also pretty sure that no one had ever brought Henry flowers grown

out of the very soil on which he lost his life, his body found hanging in a tree in what is now the front yard of The Church of Bethesda-by-the-Sea. But that late September morning, I brought Henry flowers.

As the drizzle continued and I laid the flowers on his grave, I told Henry that he was not forgotten. I told him that I preached about him on the 98th anniversary of his death on what is now our front yard. I told him about the Remembrance Project. I told him that things were changing but that we had a long way to go. And I told him that I would be back—that there might be others who came to see him now, too, but that I also would be back to pay my respects again and to apologize, again, for that for which no apology can be made.

I walked back to my car through the grass and the drizzle, got inside, and slowly, very slowly made my way around the loop, back through the neater, white part of the cemetery, and onto the highway leading west towards Gainesville, returning to a world where justice is slow to come, and some would prefer that history remain in the past, but a world in which light always overcomes darkness and in which Henry Simmons' name is not forgotten.

The Rev'd Burl Salmon

*Rector*

The Falls Church, Falls Church, Virginia

*Associate for Christian Formation, Pastoral Care,  
and Outreach (2015-2021)*

The Church of Bethesda-by-the-Sea,

Palm Beach, Florida

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