



MEMORANDUM

To: Mayor and Members of the City Council

From: Reginald Goodson, City Manager
Stacy Williams, Interim Parks and Recreation Director
Kellen Long, Development Services Director
Jon Hawley, Grants Administrator

Date: May 23, 2025

Re: Presentation - Request for Approval, National Register Nomination for Old Oak Grove Cemetery

BACKGROUND:

In August of 2023, the State Historic Preservation Office awarded the City of Elizabeth City a \$25,000 grant through the Historic Preservation Fund for the nomination of the Old Oak Grove Cemetery to the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is administered by the National Park Service, and it is the official, federal list of districts, sites, buildings, etc. that hold historical significance to their community, state or nation. There are more than 96,000 properties listed through the Register, and a Register listing has indirect and direct benefits. A Register listing may help promote a property for historical tourism, protect the property from adverse redevelopment, and potentially open up avenues of funding for preservation projects.

The City's HPF grant, which also requires a \$3,000 local match, allowed the City to hire a consultant specialized in National Register nominations, which require detailed historical evaluations of properties. After advertising the project, we selected Stantec, an international firm with a strong presence in the Southeast and extensive experience in cemetery nominations. They performed their work over 2024 and into early 2025, and now the nomination is ready to advance.

Adrienne Campbell, a Senior Architectural Historian, will present the project and its findings to the Council on May 27; a representative from Elizabeth City State University may also be present, and ask to make brief remarks. Old Oak Grove Cemetery has unique significance to ECSU, and City staff encouraged Stantec to engage the university during its work.

Following the presentation, City staff will also request approval of the nomination, per SHPO requirements.

ANALYSIS:

Stantec's presentation is enclosed for Council review, and provides an excellent summary of our project. This analysis will focus on the local actions needed to advance our nomination to state and federal consideration.

The City of Elizabeth City is a "Certified Local Government" for purposes of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, which makes us eligible for historic preservation programs, including HPF grants. For National Register nominations, CLGs must provide for public notice and comment, and formally recommend properties to the National Register.

City staff have reviewed Stantec's nomination packet and find it acceptable. Notably, nominations to the National Register must be based on one of four criteria, and Stantec determined the cemetery qualifies as a "property associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history" (Criterion A).

Per the nomination form itself:

"In 1886, Black community leaders established Oak Grove Cemetery, the oldest extant and longest operating Black cemetery in Elizabeth City. The cemetery provided the only formal Black burial ground in the city until the mid-twentieth century and remained in use through the twenty-first century. The cemetery is significant at the local level under Criterion A in the areas of Black Ethnic Heritage and Social History, due to its ability to demonstrate the social history of oppression, segregation, and Black resiliency in the American South."

City staff presented the nomination to the Historic Preservation Commission on May 14, 2025, and the Commission voted unanimously to approve/recommend the nomination. City staff request the Council approve the nomination as well, which will allow the nomination to go before the state's National Register Advisory Council and, if approved there, will advance for final, federal consideration. We are optimistic the property will be listed; North Carolina closely supervises National Register nominations, helping ensure their success.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Following Stantec's presentation, by motion: approve the National Register nomination for the Old Oak Grove Cemetery as presented.

THE CHIEF ELECTED LOCAL OFFICIAL OR THE LOCAL GOVERNING BOARD SHOULD
COMPLETE ONE OF THE FOLLOWING COMMENT PARAGRAPHS:

C. I, **Mayor E. Kirk Rivers**, or **We**, the **Elizabeth City Council**, have reviewed the nomination for the **Oak Grove Cemetery** and find that the property **meets** the criteria for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as stated in Section 8 of the report. We, therefore, **recommend** that the property be submitted for listing in the Register.

Additional Comments:

Chief Local Elected Official's signature and date

D. I, **Mayor E. Kirk Rivers**, or **We**, the **Elizabeth City Council**, have reviewed the nomination for the **Oak Grove Cemetery** and find that the property **does not meet** the criteria for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as stated in Section 8 of the report. We, therefore, **do not recommend** that the property be submitted for listing in the Register. The reasons for my (or our) findings concerning this nomination are stated below (use additional sheet if necessary).

Additional comments:

Chief Local Elected Official's signature and date