Ann and Suzy Lacy, great-great granddaughters of Madison Davis, elected to the Georgia Legislature in 1868, from Clarke County, view his burial site in the Gospel Pilgrim African-American Cemetery in East Athens.

June 20, 10 a.m. at the Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery, Fourth and Bray Streets by Springfield Baptist Church. A guided "walk" celebrating Athens-Clarke County's designation as one of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's 2009 Dozen Distinctive Destinations. Sponsored by the Athens-Clarke Heritage Foundation. Al Hester, Ph.D., tour guide.

Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery History

Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery was founded in 1882 to give Athens' African American community a cemetery all their own—and a beautiful and respectable burial place. Most African Americans had either been buried in small church cemeteries or on the fringes of the major white cemeteries in Athens.

The cemetery was founded by the Gospel Pilgrim Society, a fraternal and burial insurance organization. So far, we have not determined how it was named. Black citizens could afford to be buried in Gospel Pilgrim by paying small weekly payments and buying a lot at Gospel Pilgrim.

They were assured of a dignified burial place, a meaningful service and a fine procession to the burial site.

Most graves at Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery did not have tombstones. Of the approximately 3,500 burial sites perhaps 500 or so have identified markers. Some markers are merely field stones or hand-made concrete tombstones. But others are beautiful, with ornate carving and epitaphs.

Many black residents bought lots, and as the decades passed, buyers were buried in Gospel Pilgrim. The cemetery was most active in the 1930s and 1940s. Gradually burials became fewer. The last president of the Gospel Pilgrim Society, Alfred Hill, died in 1977, and only a handful of burials were taking place. Cemetery maintenance ceased and the Gospel Pilgrim Society was no longer active.

By 1986, African Americans and white Athens residents joined in clean-up efforts after the cemetery became overgrown and nearly abandoned. Hundreds of volunteers and Athens-Clarke County workers have since then restored the cemetery to a place of beauty. In 2008, the cemetery pathways were recreated, benches added, a new gate constructed and sidewalks placed in front of the cemetery along Fourth Street.

Gospel Pilgrim is on the National Register of Historic Places and has a Georgia State Historical marker. The East Athens Development Corp., Inc., oversees the cemetery. Athens and Clarke County residents have supported the restoration of the cemetery through a special sales tax election.
1. Wakefield C. Brunt (1893-?) This cemetery plot near the front of the cemetery is always marked with a flag on Memorial Day. Brunt was Athens' first black soldier killed in World War I. A Veterans of Foreign Wars post is named in his honor.

2. William A. Pledger (1849-1904) Co-editor of the Athens Blade and a nationally known Republican politician. Pledger was widely known for his forceful personality and his oratorical skills after the Civil War.

3. Monroe Bowers Morton (1855-1919) and his wife, Tallulah (1867-1941). Morton was one of the richest black men in the South, a skilled builder and a Republican leader.

4. Madison Davis (1833-1902) was a slave belonging to Edward Hodgson of Athens. Soon after the Civil War Davis bought property and paid taxes. He was perhaps the outstanding African American political and civic leader in Clarke County. Active in Republican politics, he was elected to the Georgia Legislature in 1868. He was an advocate of public education and was a delegate to an education convention in 1867. Davis was relatively well off. He had a notable, large two story house on Newton Street. His wife, Ella, and their children were educators. Davis served as Athens' first black postmaster.

5. Mrs. Minnie Davis (1859-1940): One of Athens' most dedicated African American teachers, who literally taught in black schools until her feet wore out. School officials finally had to insist that she retire. She also had a career as publisher of the Clipper, a black newspaper in Athens after her husband's death.

6. Mrs. Susan McIntosh (about 1850-1940) This ex-slave encouraged her son, Andrew Jones, shown here, to become one of Athens' leading African American doctors.

7. Mrs. Harriet Powers (1837?-1910) Known internationally for her unique Biblical and natural phenomena quilts now exhibited in two leading museums, she is buried in Gospel Pilgrim, but her marker is damaged and not on public view. A replica may take its place.

8. Mrs. Laura Reid (1867-1929) The wife of Lorenzo Reid is buried in Gospel Pilgrim in the Reid lot. She was a daughter of Alfred Richardson, one of the two first African Americans to represent Clarke County in the Georgia Legislature in 1868. Laura was a teacher and a graduate of Atlanta University.

9. Samuel F. Harris (1889-1935) was a nationally known educator who pioneered in industrial and vocational education. He was principal of Georgia's first accredited black high school. He attended classes at the University long before racial integration.

10. Pope Ray (1878-1963) was a familiar figure around Athens for many years. Essentially homeless, he did odd jobs and slept under downtown buildings. After he died, blacks and whites together raised donations for a fine tombstone for him. Columnist Jack Martin in the Athens Banner-Herald, said "Ole Pope" lived a life of "nearly unbearable hardships, yet he never complained." On his tombstone is written: "He hated no one."