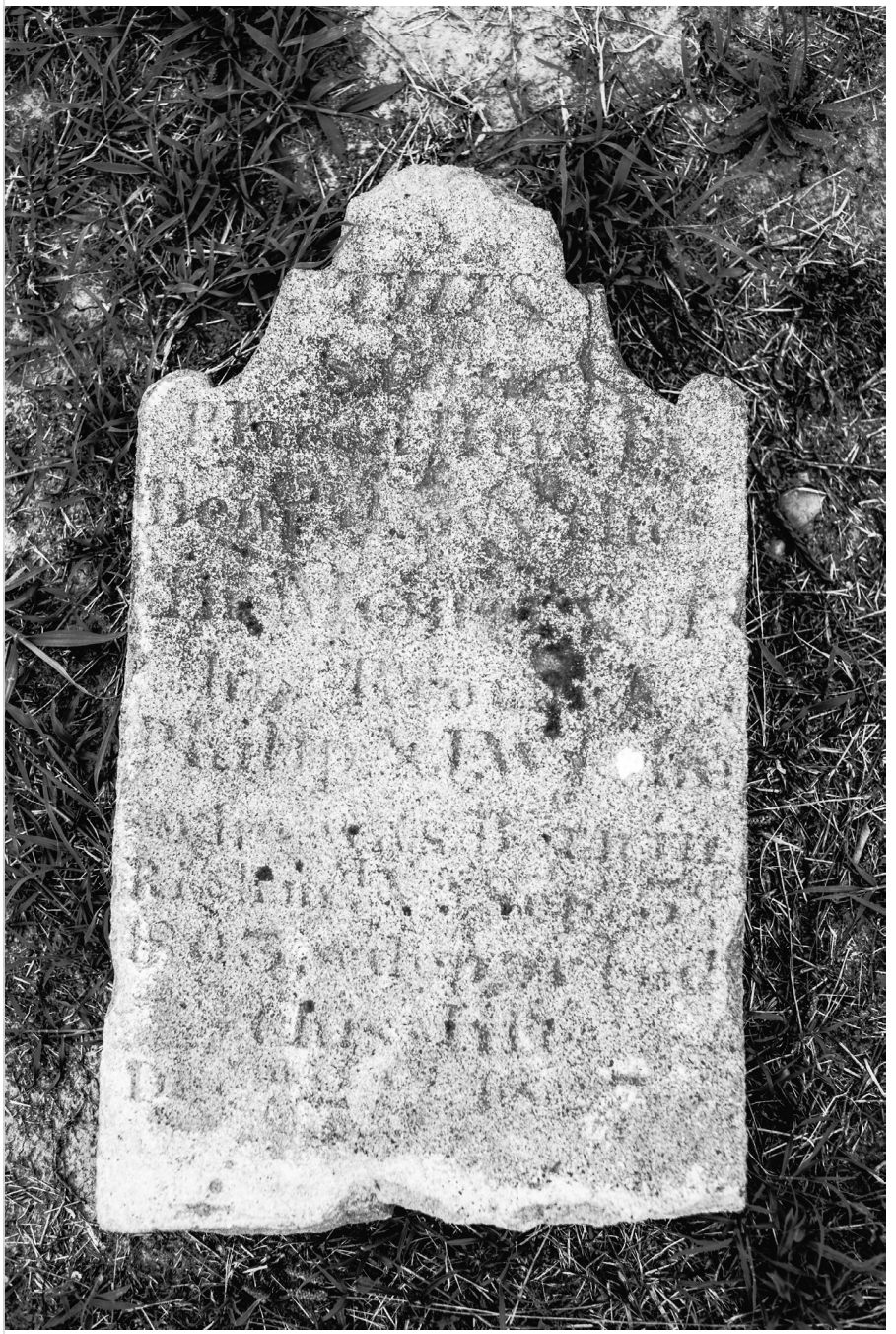
ESSAY

Philip N. J. Wythe's Headstone

by Ryan K. Smith



The headstone of Philip N. J. Wythe in Barton Heights Cemeteries, Richmond, Virginia. All photographs, July 2017, by Kate Thompson Feucht.

The headstone marking the grave of Philip N. J. Wythe now lies flat on its back, face to the sun, partially hidden among the tall grasses at the Barton Heights Cemeteries in Richmond, Virginia. The marker's form is deceptively simple. Made of coarse-grained sandstone, it features no pictorial symbols, no death's head or cherub or weeping willow. Rather, its primary decoration comes in the form of its inscription. Blocky, even letters fill the entire face of the stone:

THIS
Stone is
Placed Here by
Benj^{mn} Wythe
In Memory of
his Brother
Philip N. J. Wythe
who was Born in
Richm^{d} V^{a} Sep^{t} 3^{d}
1803 & departed
this life
Dec^{m} 24th 1827

Above the lengthy inscription, baroque lines divide the top of the stone into three sections—two smaller shoulder caps leading up to a central, rounded tympanum. Taken in its entirety, the marker is an embodiment, as its namesake was an embodiment, of the interconnectedness of southern history. Overlooked today, it challenges us to engage with the southern past in a way that few other artifacts can.

Approaching the object, the first thing we observe is its very survival. People of African descent, the vast majority of whom were enslaved, made up a steady half of Richmond's population. For generations, this half of the population had only one public burial option: the so-called "Burial Ground for Negroes" located on the steep banks of Shockoe Creek. And this site was far from permanent. In use as late as 1816, the unbounded ground was prone to flooding, where, as free black resident Christopher McPherson lamented, "every heavy rain commits ravages upon some one grave or another, and some coffins have already been washed away." This "mock of a grave yard" also became the site of the city gallows, where criminals were shamed, publicly executed, and then interred in humiliation. Richmonders of African descent who may have felt reverence toward this ground and its offerings soon saw a jail built on the site as well as a charity school for whites. In the twentieth century, the construction of an interstate highway completed the effacement. Thus, early authorities sought to close off opportunities for the public memorialization of black lives.[1]

Yet Benjamin Wythe and other free black residents had found a way to lay claim to their place in the city. In 1815, after years of protest over the conditions at the

Burial Ground for Negroes, dozens of these artisans, barbers, carters, seamstresses, boarding house keepers, and other workers pooled funds to create a "Burying Ground Society of the Free People of Color of the City of Richmond." The group succeeded in purchasing a lot just north of town on Academy Hill for this purpose, to be known as the "Phoenix Burying Ground." Wythe's gravestone for his brother is the oldest surviving stone in the yard. As such, it is the earliest in situ African American artifact in the region, and perhaps the earliest surviving grave marker erected by a person of African ancestry in Virginia.[2]

The marker's lengthy inscription underscores its claims for monumentality and currency. Literacy itself was a dangerous quality, after all. The marker appeared during the lifetimes of those who remembered the failed rebellion in 1800, when the enslaved and literate blacksmith Gabriel forged a coalition of slaves, free blacks, and a few abolition-minded whites aiming to overturn the political order amid the language of liberty. In the crackdown that followed, free blacks saw the erosion of their tenuous rights—they were required to register with local officials and carry freedom papers; their testimony was inadmissible against white persons in court; and they were barred from attending night meetings, gambling, or riding in carriages unless as servants. Yet the pursuit of literacy remained, even after the clerk Christopher McPherson was run out of town following his attempt to open a school for local blacks. Benjamin Wythe's words, hardened in stone on Academy Hill, made a statement that would resonate as broadly as any pictorial symbol.[3]

And the substance of his inscribed words was direct. "*THIS* stone is placed here," Wythe's inscription begins. It was an unusual formulation among early American epitaphs, which by the early nineteenth century typically opened with variations on "In memory of . . ." In contrast, Wythe's message calls immediate attention to the stone itself, its location, and its sponsor. "*THIS* stone is placed here by Benj^{mn} Wythe." In all, it raises and answers the question of who gets to speak for the dead, a key assertion for black Virginians. The inscription goes on to detail a relation of kinship, a brotherhood. Further, it recognizes the dignity of the individual buried beneath, giving Philip's place of origin and his precise birth and death dates—a young man lost in his prime and mourned by those around him. At the same time, this marker and its neighbors provided a space for the performance of funeral rituals to serve an oral culture.[4]

As distinctive as these claims may have been, the marker nevertheless confirms a close relationship with those whites buried across town in the yard of St. John's church. The marker achieves this in its overall form, which is common across the hallowed old grounds atop Church Hill. For example, four years prior to Wythe's death, the survivors of John Hardy raised a similar headstone in 1823 (figure 2). Hardy's marker featured a comparable grain of stone, a tripartite top with shoulder caps, inverted inner curves, and a tympanum above a central horizontal step, with lettering as its sole inscribed decoration. Four slight flourishes highlight the inscription, but



The headstone of John Hardy in St. John's churchyard, Richmond, Virginia.

its blocky lettering conveyed a familiar formula of attributes. Like Wythe's inscription, it was offered to the "Memory of" the deceased with reference to Hardy's birth and death dates and his birthplace (in this case, in Fife Shire, Scotland). In these parallels, Wythe's statement gestured toward parity, even community.

That connection closed even tighter when we consider that Benjamin and Philip may have taken their surname from George Wythe, jurist and signer of the Declaration of Independence whose gravesite in St. John's churchyard is one of the main attractions there. Wythe was known for his anti-slavery sentiments, and the great-aunt of Benjamin and Philip, Lydia Broadnax, had been a longtime servant in Wythe's household. Born into slavery, Broadnax served the childless widower Wythe as a housekeeper for years following her manumission in 1787, and she accompanied the chancellor in his move to Richmond from Williamsburg in 1791. In her will, written in 1820, Broadnax gave all her property (consisting of a house on a half-acre Richmond lot, her furniture, and her savings) "to Philip Wythe and Benjamin Wythe, free boys of colour, grandsons of my sister Letty Robertson deceased." Nothing more specific is known about the mother of Benjamin and Philip; Broadnax's will suggests a close sense of family among those three who remained. After Broadnax herself died in February 1827, funds from her estate likely helped Benjamin erect the tribute to his brother.[5]

Funds from the estate of the young men's father likely helped Benjamin raise the monument as well. And his identity introduces yet another element into the complex shape of their history, for he was recognized as Isaac Judah, the first reader, or *hazan*, of Richmond's Congregation Beth Shalome, the sixth-oldest synagogue in the United States. A Sephardic Jew, Judah was a wealthy merchant and landowner who had resided in the city since the 1780s. Judah never married, and before he died in May 1827, he named Benjamin and Philip in his will as beneficiaries, as "free mulatto boys & brothers whom I brought up, in consideration of their attachment & fidelity, and my natural regard for them," awarding them several city lots and eight hundred dollars. This was a personal statement, not a political statement, for while Judah's will provided manumission for two female slaves, it also directed four other slaves to be sold. So, we can infer that Judah's "natural regard" for the two young men was due to his parentage, just as Benjamin adopted the Judah surname shortly after the latter's death. A rounded, neoclassical headstone was raised over Isaac Judah's grave in the city's Hebrew Cemetery, which stood within sight of Academy Hill. Months later, attendants at Judah's grave could look across the valley to see the marker raised for his son, glinting just in the distance.[6]

The entangled families, livelihoods, and artistic conventions expressed in these graves make a statement rarely found in the tradition of "dual heritage" so often expressed by white and black southerners. The entanglement points to the place of minorities—ethnic, religious, urban, free—embedded in the south-



The Barton Heights Cemeteries.

ern landscape, standing against the commonplace portrait of the Old South. In this, Wythe's marker is especially profound. It creates what Michael Schudson and Elizabethada Wright call an "available past," allowing for the possibility of marginalized residents and stories to enter public memory.[7]

Few of the thousands of visitors and schoolchildren who wander through St. John's churchyard every year looking for the region's Revolutionary-era history find their way to the cemetery in which Wythe's stone rests. To do so, they would need to leave the comforts of the St. John's Church Historic District, head north up Shockoe Valley, north of the interstate, and north of a ravine, into the heart of a distressed neighborhood. Earlier, at the turn of the twentieth century, the twelve-acre cemetery complex in which the Phoenix Burying Ground had become a part fell victim to new streetcar suburbs built on Academy Hill. The incoming white residents of "Barton Heights" sought to have the black burial grounds closed. This was accomplished in 1904, and the city of Richmond took over ownership of the property a few decades later. The site fell into neglect, as highway construction and white flight changed its environs again. The fortunes of the "Barton Heights



Cemeteries" were revived for a time in the 1990s by Denise Lester, a newly arrived descendant of a freedman interred there. Appalled by the burial ground's condition and by the fact that some black residents were unaware of its significance—"some of them thought it was a Jewish cemetery," she found—Lester gathered a group of volunteers for public events at the cemetery, rallied the city to attend to its upkeep, placed it on the National Register of Historic Places, and erected a state highway marker at the site. Lester could not sustain her activity, however, and by the 2010s, the site was sleepy again, despite its innovative place in the region's history (figure 3).[8]

So the gravestone's current neglect belies the hostility expressed by white southerners toward such a multifaceted view of the region's past. It remains imperative to find. For a city built on slavery, in what was the most populous southern state, the marker offers a portal through which to see what W. E. B. DuBois called "the strange meaning of being black." Its jarring singularity conveys the tension of double consciousness, in which, as expressed by DuBois, "one ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." Untorn, the stone lies there today, warmed in the sun, cooled in the frost, still faintly legible, and its legacy is ours.[9]

NOTES

1. Christopher McPherson, *Christ's Millennium, of One Thousand Years Commenced and the Downfall of Kings, &c., Before the Throne of Justice, by the Word Particularly Sent to Them as Noted Herein* (Richmond: Printed for the author, 1811); "The Lancastrian Institution," *Richmond Enquirer* (June 29, 1816); William Arthur Maddox, *The Free School Idea in Virginia Before the Civil War: A Phase of Political and Social Evolution* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1918), 28–9; [Ernest Taylor Walthall], *Hidden Things Brought to Light* (Richmond, Va.: Walthall Printing Co., 1908); Christopher M. Stevenson, "Burial Ground for Negroes, Richmond, Virginia: Validation and Assessment," Virginia Department of Historic Resources, June 2008.

2. James B. Browning, "The Beginnings of Insurance Enterprise Among Negroes," *Journal of Negro History* 22 (October 1937): 417–32; Gregg D. Kimball and Nancy Jawish Rives, "'To Live in Hearts We Leave Behind Is Not to Die': The Barton Heights Cemeteries of Richmond," *Virginia Cavalcade* 46 (Winter 1997): 118–31. M. Ruth Little has identified African American gravestones in New Bern, North Carolina, dating to 1805, removed from their original locations. See Little, *Sticks and Stones: Three Centuries of North Carolina Gravemarkers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 38. For such markers generally in Virginia, see Lynn Rainville, *Hidden History: African-American Cemeteries in Central Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014). For such markers in the North, see Erik R. Seeman, *Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492–1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 185–231; Glenn A. Knoblock, *African American Historic Burial Grounds and Gravesites of New England* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2016).

3. James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730–1810* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Michael L. Nicholls, *Whispers of Rebellion: Narrating Gabriel's Conspiracy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012); and Edmund Berkeley Jr.,

"Prophet Without Honor: Christopher McPherson, Free Person of Color," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 77 (April 1969): 180–90.

4. For early American epitaphs, see James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life* rev. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1996). For comparable epitaphs in Richmond's churchyard, see *Annals of Henrico Parish and History of St. John's P. E. Church*, ed. J. Staunton Moore (Richmond: Williams Printing Company, 1904).

5. Will of Lydia Broadnax, September 25, 1820, City of Richmond Hustings Court will book 4, 361–62, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia; Andrew Nunn McKnight, "Lydia Broadnax, Slave, and Free Woman of Color," *Southern Studies* 5 (Spring and Summer 1994): 17–30; Philip D. Morgan, "Interracial Sex in the Chesapeake and the British Atlantic World, c. 1700–1820," in Jan Ellen Lewis and Peter S. Onuf, *Sally Hemings & Thomas Jefferson: History, Memory, and Civic Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 52–84.

6. Will of Isaac H. Judah, April 16, 1827, Richmond Hustings Court will book 4, 313–18, Library of Virginia; "The Judah Will," http://judahwill.rampages.us/, accessed July 1, 2017; Myron Berman, *Richmond's Jewry, 1769–1976: Shabbat in Shockoe* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia for the Jewish Community Federation of Richmond, 1979). For the first recorded instance of Benjamin Wythe adding Judah as his surname, see indenture between David Judah and Benjamin Wythe Judah, April 2, 1846, Richmond Hustings Court will book 49, Library of Virginia. Benjamin married the free woman of color Judith Hope sometime before 1831. The 1850 and 1860 censuses both list Benjamin as a shoemaker. He died at fifty-eight years old in 1864. No headstone survives for him. See http://judahwill.rampages.us/.

7. For "dual heritage," see Dell Upton, *What Can and Can't Be Said: Race, Uplift, and Monument Building in the Contemporary South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015). For the "available past," see Michael Schudson, "Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory," in *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past*, ed. Daniel L. Schacter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) and Elizabethada A. Wright, "Rhetorical Spaces in Memorial Places: The Cemetery as a Rhetorical Memory Place/Space," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35 (Fall 2005): 51–81.

8. "An Act to Amend and Re-Enact Section 1416 of the Code of Virginia," March 14, 1904, in *Acts and Joint Resolutions Passed by the General Assembly of the State of Virginia, During the Session of 1904* (Richmond: O'Bannon, 1904), 281; "Town Council Acts," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, September 15, 1904; "Refused Them Permission," *Richmond Planet*, January 13, 1906; Denise I. Lester, "Barton Heights Cemeteries," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, 2000; Lester, quoted in Gary Robertson, "Long Neglected 'City of the Dead' Gets Attention," *Richmond Times Dispatch*, June 1, 1998.

9. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* fifth ed. (Chicago: McClurg, 1903), vii, 3.