

Southport cemetery makes it on to National Register of Historic Places

John Staton

Wilmington StarNews

Published 6:00 a.m. ET Oct. 23, 2021



Headstones of Kittie Smith (1827-1876, left) and John N. Smith (1840-1874) in John N. Smith Cemetery in Southport.
Heather Fearnbach

A Southport cemetery created by the town's Black community in 1874 has been added to the National Register of Historic Places.

According to a news release from the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, the John N. Smith Cemetery at 225 E. Leonard St. in downtown Southport is one of eight sites statewide recently added to the Register. The cemetery was added on Aug. 9.

The cemetery is owned by a nonprofit group, [the John N. Smith Cemetery Restoration and Preservation, Inc.](#), which has been active in restoring the cemetery.



Renee Sanders-Lawson scrubs off mold and algae from a gravestone in the John N. Smith Cemetery in Southport, in 2016. CAROLYN BOWERS/FOR THE STARNEWS

According to documents filed with the National Register of Historic Places, in 2017 and 2018, ground-penetrating radar surveys conducted by New South Associates found that the site contains more than 1,700 graves, with all but about 500 of those graves unmarked.

More: What is the oldest cemetery in Wilmington?

Most, if not all, of the people buried there are thought to be African Americans.

Just five headstones from the 1870s remain, including one for the cemetery's namesake, John N. Smith.



Sarah Lowry (right) and Maeve Herrick use ground penetrating radar to map grave sites in Southport's historic John N. Smith Cemetery. TERRY REILLY/FOR THE STARNEWS

Related: [Preserving Southport's African-American history](#)

Photos: [Southport's historic John N. Smith Cemetery](#)

More: [Supporters restoring Southport's Black cemetery](#)

Some graves are decorated with conch and oyster shells, a tradition that originated in West Africa and was brought to the Southern United States by enslaved Black people. According to the John N. Smith Cemetery website, "The practice of using seashells to mark graves has been traced back to an African belief that the sea shell encloses the soul's immortal presence."



The shell-covered graves of Sarah Ann Gillespie Howe (1889-1965) and Wellington C. Howe Jr. (1875-1928) in John N. Smith Cemetery in Southport. Heather Fearnbach

Brunswick County is part of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, an area that stretches up the coast from Florida to North Carolina and was established by Congress as a way of recognizing the culture of the Gullah Geechee people.

The release from North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources says "the cemetery was acquired in 1880 by trustees of what became St. James African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, which was the town's only Black congregation at that time."

Originally a two-acre site, it was expanded to 3.5 acres in 1949, by which time it served five Black churches in Southport.



Judy Gordon, president of the John N. Smith Cemetery Restoration and Preservation nonprofit in Southport, poses in front of the grave of her great-great grandfather. TERRY REILLY/FOR THE STARNEWS

“North Carolina continues to be a leader in preserving historic places treasured by their communities,” D. Reid Wilson, secretary of the N.C. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, said in the release. “Adding new properties to the National Register of Historic Places spurs local economic development, preserves community identity, and expands and diversifies the story of North Carolina.”

The National Register of Historic Places is maintained by the National Park Service, and all additions must be approved by the federal government.



A wooden Sign marking the John N. Smith Cemetery in Southport. TERRY REILLY/FOR THE STARNEWS

Listing a property in the National Register doesn't create special obligations or restrictions for property owners as long as they use private funds to maintain or alter the site. It does, however, make property owners eligible for tax credits that can be used to fix up the historic sites.