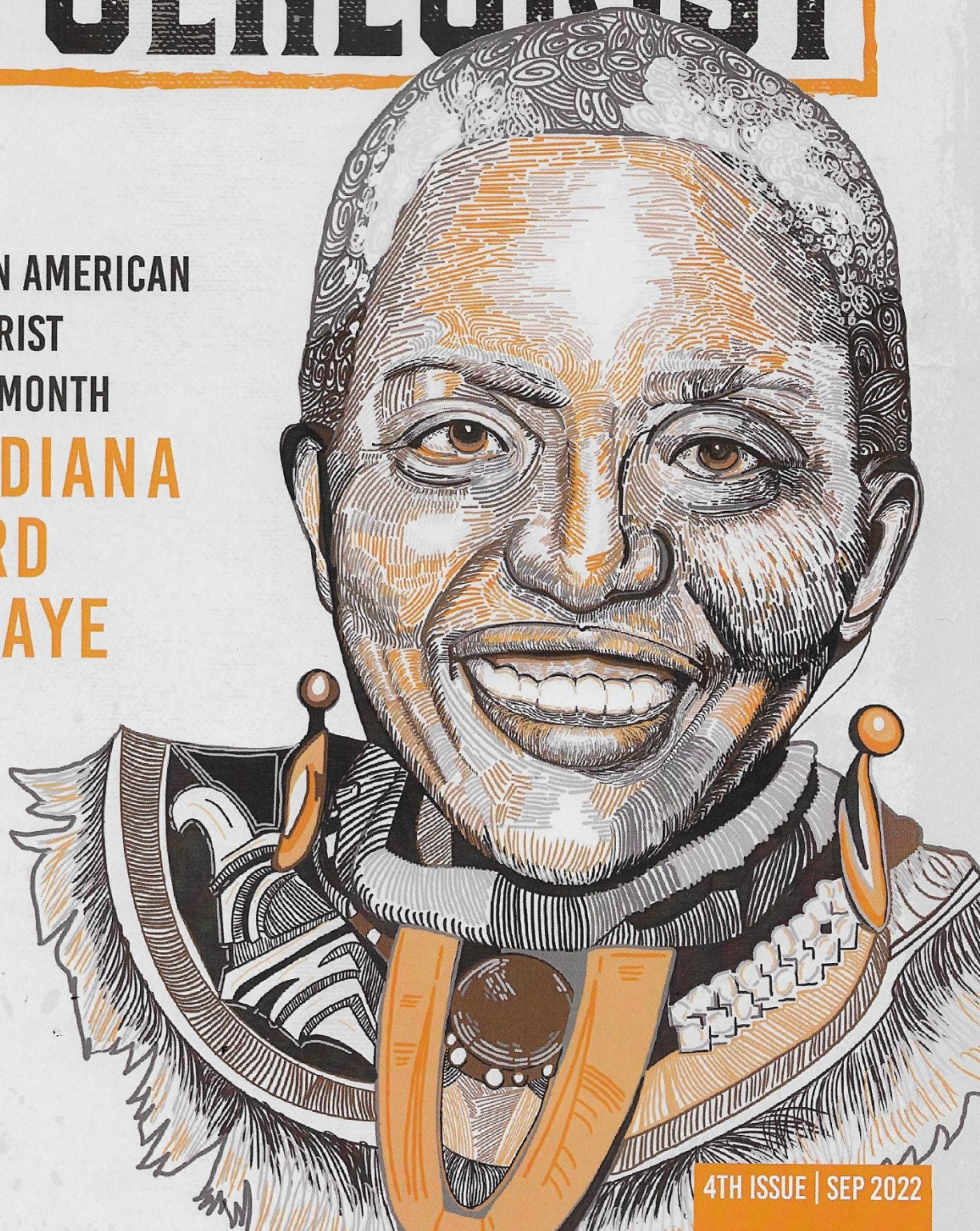


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# DESECRATION OF HISTORIC AFRICAN AMERICAN CEMETERY IN AVALON, MISSISSIPPI

RESTING PLACE OF COUNTRY BLUES ARTIST – MISSISSIPPI JOHN HURT

BY VALERIE TURNER FOR THE MISSISSIPPI JOHN HURT FOUNDATION

The desecration of African American cemeteries is nothing new, and reports from all corners of the country are a constant reminder that Black lives are not safe—not even in death!

Avalon, Mississippi, hometown of the well-known Country Blues artist, Mississippi John Hurt, was once a vibrant African American community established in Carroll County during the early 1800s. The town was home to hundreds of African American families through the late 1970s.

Located on St. James Road in Avalon, the St. James Church served as the only African American church, school, and community social center of Carroll County, and it stood atop a hill where the late Mississippi John Hurt was born, raised, and educated. This church was a mecca, and the heartbeat of the town of Avalon, for all African American families in Carroll County. This sacred ground was also the final resting place for all of the African Americans in the Avalon community. Known as the St. James Cemetery, it was the only burial site for African Americans in Avalon and its surrounding communities in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The tragic desecration of this historic cemetery is the topic of this article, but first a bit of background is necessary in order to put this cemetery in context.

After being destroyed in a storm in 1896, remnants of the original St. James Church were



**The reconstructed St. James Church.**

salvaged for its reconstruction in the early 1900s. Situated in a field not too far from its original site, the new St. James Church resumed its service to the African American community of Carroll County, and parishioner burials continued to take place in the St. James Cemetery near the grounds of the church's original location on St. James Road.

Long-time African American residents of Avalon recall that this burial ground spanned both sides of the narrow St. James Road leading up to the site of the original church. Tall trees graced



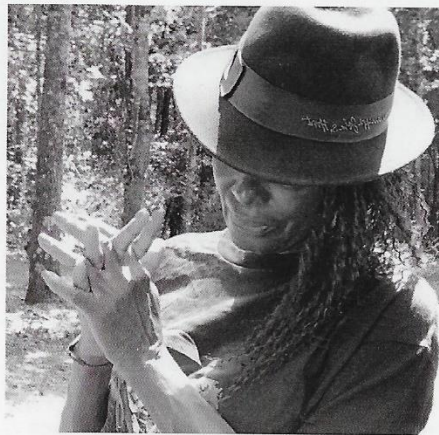
**Gravesite of Mississippi John Hurt in the St. James Cemetery.**

the cemetery, creating dappled light shining down on the peaceful resting places of many of Carroll County's African American residents—including the famous gravesite of Mississippi John Hurt, and numerous members of the Hurt family. The St. James Cemetery is distinguished as being the sole African American cemetery in Carroll County, Mississippi, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and generations of African Americans are buried there. Until the late 1990s, there were no residents living along the St. James Road and African Americans with ties to the area continued to bury family members there on both sides of the road, with the last recorded burial being as recent as 2017.

At the turn of the 21st century, the town of Avalon underwent gentrification and wider roads were constructed to service its new residents. When the St. James Road was enlarged as part of this process, many graves belonging to the St. James Cemetery were desecrated. In an attempt to prevent further desecration of this sacred African American burial ground, Mary Frances Hurt, granddaughter of Mississippi John Hurt and Founder/

President of the non-profit Mississippi John Hurt Foundation, sprang into action and ordered a survey which showed that the widened St. James Road had encroached upon the historic St. James Cemetery and had impacted numerous graves.

Ms. Hurt, who now lives in Illinois, makes periodic visits to the St. James Cemetery, and these visits often coincide with an annual Homecoming Festival, sponsored by the Mississippi John Hurt Foundation, to celebrate the life and music of her grandfather, the most famous resident of Avalon. She missed this graveside pilgrimage during the last in-person festival in 2019. She was also unable to visit during the height of the pandemic, so it wasn't until the spring of 2022 that Ms. Hurt discovered that the St. James Cemetery had suffered new and shocking desecration. According to Ms. Hurt, age old trees had been chopped down resulting in soil erosion, numerous graves had been disturbed



**Mary Frances Hurt.**  
Courtesy of Samuel Ellis.

or destroyed, many grave markers had disappeared, new graves had been installed over pre-existing ones, and she had even heard reports of human bones being exposed in the churned earth.

Adding insult to injury, a marker reading "Durbin Cemetery" had

appeared at the main entrance of the St. James Cemetery. The casual renaming of this 200-year-old, historic, African American cemetery was a very hurtful discovery. Carroll County officials claimed to have no knowledge of permission being granted to rename the burial ground, and the County had no objection to the removal of the marker. The marker has been turned over until arrangements can be made for its permanent removal. In its place, a new marker must be installed to correctly identify this historic African American burial as the St. James Cemetery, and fundraising is underway for this purpose. If you would like to help in this regard, the Mississippi Hurt Foundation appreciates tax-deductible donations at [PayPal.Me/MSJohnHurtFoundation](https://PayPal.Me/MSJohnHurtFoundation).

Further investigation by Ms. Hurt revealed that the site of the original St. James Church and its surrounding cemetery had been claimed as a private burial ground which is now owned by Charles Spain, a local white resident. Although the warranty deed for the claim explicitly excluded the St. James Cemetery from its land assignment, the deed also reduced the historic cemetery's size to less than one acre of land – meaning that legions of African American graves had been totally disregarded. It bears mentioning that, prior to this land being claimed as a private cemetery, there is no knowledge of white residents ever being buried in the St. James Cemetery.

Upon confronting the new owner with information about the pre-existing St. James Cemetery on the 6.5 acres of land described in the warranty deed, Ms. Hurt says that the owner's response was, "I don't care." Having several generations of maternal and paternal relatives

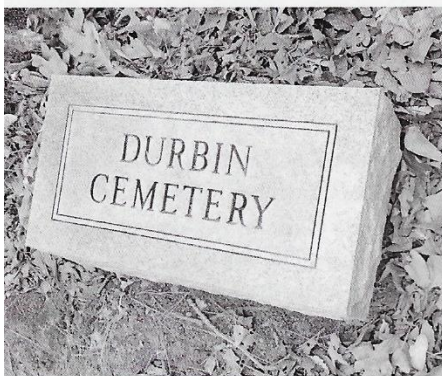
buried in the St. James Cemetery, Ms. Hurt was stunned, heartbroken, and outraged over such blatant disregard for this important part of her heritage—as well as the heritage of many other African American families with generations of ancestors buried there. Although the grave of Mississippi John Hurt was spared during the most recent desecration, the new owner failed to acknowledge the hundreds of other graves that are equally deserving of respect.

A cursory examination of the area by a local forester uncovered possible evidence of old graves beyond the perimeter of the paltry land area allocated to the cemetery by the warranty deed, and plans are currently being considered by the

African American burial ground, she single-handedly orchestrated the rescue of the rebuilt St. James Church as well as the original home of her grandfather, Mississippi John Hurt. These structures have been relocated to property owned by the Mississippi John Hurt Foundation, where the Foundation holds its annual Homecoming Festival in Avalon.

The rebuilt St. James Church was rededicated on Foundation property in 2018 and there are plans to use it as a schoolhouse where workshops can be taught to introduce early Blues history to younger members of the community—including the music legacy of Mississippi John Hurt. And the beloved musician's three-

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**New marker at entrance of the St. James Cemetery.**

University of Alabama to use ground-penetrating radar to identify human remains throughout the entire land assignment. If, as expected, widespread evidence of old graves is proven, steps will need to be taken to restore the sanctity of this sacred ground.

This is one of many sad stories depicting outrageous actions that disrespect and eradicate African American burial grounds throughout the country, but Mary Frances Hurt is its silver lining. In addition to advocating for recognition of the St. James Cemetery as a historic



**Mississippi John Hurt Museum.**

room wooden home was converted into a small museum, the Mississippi John Hurt Museum, which houses artifacts related to his life and times. Both structures deserve landmark status due to their historical value and, until that designation is assigned, Ms. Hurt does her best to maintain these fragile structures using her own limited resources.

The Mississippi John Hurt Foundation is supported by the generosity of fans around the world. It is also supported in large part by

Mary Frances Hurt herself. A loving and dedicated granddaughter, she has given it her life, her soul, her everything.

Funding is urgently needed to maintain the historic structures on the Foundation's property, to conduct Foundation business, and now to protect the historic St. James Cemetery which is in danger of being lost forever. Sponsors, donors, philanthropists, and volunteer grant writers interested in helping the Foundation build a solid and sustainable financial base to support its important work are encouraged to contact Mary Hurt at [mfhurt\\_wright@yahoo.com](mailto:mfhurt_wright@yahoo.com).