Rough Draft

History is remembered and passed down through countless ways, whether that be written accords, personal narratives, or artifacts that are studied. Not only is history remembered, but it is also destroyed and forgotten, whether purposeful or not. Burial grounds bridge this gap between forgotten and remembered history. Looking into gravestones can give us insight into trends and patterns which have not been documented. In 19th and 20th century Durham, wealth inequalities between white and black communities can be observed in burial practices through a multitude of ways. In particular at Maplewood and Geer Cemetery, which were separated by race, observations can be made looking at materials of grave markers, size and design of them, and even looking at the current condition of the graveyards today. Not only are trends realized looking at the physical remains, but studying the marker's inscriptions more closely can reveal economic differences.

Data was collected at Maplewood and Geer Cemeteries by several teams of students over multiple days. First we surveyed Maplewood cemetery, the originally white cemetery of Durham which spans over 120 acres. We documented 140 markers ranging from small tablets to large ornate statues. Surveyed second was Geer cemetery which is the black cemetery in Durham. Much smaller than its counterpart, it spans 3 acres so every visible marker was recorded, totaling to 268. Collecting data on these was difficult at times because of the weathered condition the older markers were in. Our professor, Dr. Tharler, compiled the data into Microsoft Excel which made it very easy to analyse and understand patterns within the data.

First looking at the materials used in the creation of grave markers, it is quite apparent the stark differences between Maplewood and Geer. First off, Maplewood is made up of only two materials for the most part, marble and granite. Both of these are premium materials that are known to last hundreds of years while also looking very nice. Looking at Geer’s makeup though, there were several different options chosen from, ranging from granite to concrete (Fig 1). Because of the larger range of materials used, it becomes apparent the large range socioeconomic class which the black community was broken into. Concrete was a material that could be created quickly and cheaply, but still provided the respect that they could provide for their loved ones. In the black community during this time, a wide range of jobs were being done in the community. Influential Durham figures such as Edian Markum and Margaret Faucette were laid to rest in Geer as well as everyday laborers. Ranging from business owners to factory workers, it can be observed that the wealthier counterparts in the black community were able to afford the materials similar to whites, whereas laborers only could purchase the cheaper alternatives. It can be inferred from this data that white communities had less disparities in income, with the black community having a large wage gap. Not only is this observable here in materials, but also in the design of these markers.

Ornate designs are seen in both Geer and Maplewood, but are rare among the majority in both. Because of this, you can see that the elite of both of these groups were able to afford these designs, but it was not common. Size of gravestones is directly related to its price, because the material needed to create these was priced based on weight and size. After looking at total average heights of the markers though, Maplewoods were larger on average (Fig 2). This points to the larger overhanging theme that whites during this time were in power and therefore wealthier. Within communities although, again more disparity is seen within the Geer, with many markers only being inches tall. The large range of workers within this community from trained professionals (Doctors, lawyers, etc.) compared to laborers and unskilled workers is the reasoning for this size difference, which is not highlighted as much in Maplewood. Not only do the physical features of these markers illustrate wealth differences, studying the information recorded can reveal many interesting things.

After looking at trends within the data, it becomes clear that there are clear differences between Geer and Maplewood. One that is apparent is the average age between white and black residents, with white averages being slightly longer (Fig 3). This can be directly related to lifestyle and access to healthcare. Documents outlining hospital access make it clear that whites had much better hospital systems. Hospitals were segregated with the black counterparts receiving much less funding which correlates to worse care. Not only this, but only white Americans at this time were being trained as doctors, so blacks in Durham could not provide care for their own in private practices. This created a vicious cycle which in turn led to lower average life spans in the black community. Not only were lifespans lower, but also the rate at which younger people died was at a higher percentage compared to Maplewood cemetery (Fig 4). Childbirth was dangerous enough in times without modern medicine, but with lack of access to proper pre and post-natal care death rates in young women in the black community was higher as well (Louden). All of these factors had an impact on life expectancy.

Comparing today's cemeteries is a totally different story. On one hand, Maplewood is a huge cemetery kept in pristine condition. This has required constant money and investment into this property to keep it this nice. Geer today cannot say the same about its condition. After being shut down in the 1940s due to health violations, its condition has diminished horribly (The History of Historically Black Geer Cemetery). Trees have sprouted up and make the cemetery very wooded, sometimes uprooting headstones. Not only this, but coffins buried underneath have collapsed which makes many areas sunken beneath the ground. Obvious preference to cemeteries separated by race has been shown by local governments. Today, the City of Durham recognizes two cemeteries on city property, Maplewood and Beechwood. These cemeteries are operated and maintained by the city using taxpayers dollars. This is blatantly disrespectful to the black community, many with ancestors buried in these forgotten cemeteries. When plans for construction of highway 147 were drawn up, the historically black cemetery Wolf Den was uprooted and relocated. Power in local governments can be traced back to holding of wealth, as running for office requires influence and platform. All of these decisions to disturb and forget about cemeteries can be traced back to decisions made in governments, almost always with Durhams black community getting the short end of the stick.

After looking at all of this data critically, it is clear that blacks in Durham have not had the same opportunity to create wealth compared to the white community. Not only is this seen during the lifespans of this community, but also when being put to rest. Thankfully, our team's survey will help bring awareness to this topic and with the help of Friends of Geer cemetery change can be made to recognize this sacred burial ground again. Wealth inequalities in this area are still very apparent, with Black Durhamites being twice as likely to be impoverished compared to whites (DeMarco). Change is underway, and understanding the past is the quickest way to realize what is happening all over again with gentrification in Durham. History does not have to repeat itself although, with initiatives to create equity among racial barriers. After getting an introduction to the complex nature of Durham's past, I ask readers to leave with cognizance of an ever changing landscape with deep ties to the buried.