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**Sent:** Friday, May 27, 2022 11:31 AM

**To:** Katie P. Halloran <[katie.halloran@cityofkeywest-fl.gov](mailto:katie.halloran@cityofkeywest-fl.gov)>

**Cc:** Arlo Haskell <[arlo@kwls.org](mailto:arlo@kwls.org)>

**Subject:** [EXTERNAL] Peary Court / Site #3 / impacts to African-American cemetery

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May 27, 2022

City of Key West  
Planning Department  
Director Katie P. Halloran

Dear Ms. Halloran:

I am executive director of Key West Literary Seminar, property owner of 624 White Street, which is located within 500 feet of the proposed development at Peary Court.

I am writing to raise concerns which may not have been addressed in the review process to-date concerning the historic military burial grounds and human remains of military personnel and civilians which are documented in the area which is proposed for development and identified as "Site #3." The area around this site was used as a military burial grounds from approximately 1831 to 1927; the veterans who are buried there apparently include African-American members of the 2nd Colored US Infantry which fought to preserve the Union during the Civil War, and which suffered heavy losses to yellow fever in 1864-65. I believe this site, and a fuller understanding of it than we have today, are important to understanding Key West's history and the crucial role which African Americans played in preserving the Union.

For years, it was wrongly believed that the cemetery and its human remains had been properly relocated in 1927. Tragically, this was not the case, as is documented in a 1991 assessment completed by the US Army Corps of Engineers at the request of Naval Air Station Key West, formally known as "Archaeological and Historical Investigations for Proposed U.S. Navy Peary Court Housing Project Key West, Monroe County, Florida." The file is too large to attach to this email but can be downloaded at the Dropbox link below:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/7bhat43lqmoz3e3/1991-0319-Post-Cemetery-Peary-Court-Archeological-Report.pdf?dl=0>

Upon completion of its report, the Army Corps issued requirements which appear to guide future development of the area. Among these requirements are a "cemetery buffer zone" which "lies on the north and northeast sides of the cemetery and consists of a 5' set back from the original fence post holes to a new wrought iron fence, a 25' set back from the original fence post holes to new dwellings, and a 50' setback from the original fence post holes to any storm water runoff ponds."

I believe your office will find that some of the new dwellings proposed for Site #3 do not comply with the 25' "cemetery buffer zone" required by the Army Corps of Engineers. The proposed dwellings appear

to be sited significantly further south than the dwelling which previously occupied a portion of this site (destroyed by fire circa 2005).

I am also a historian and author of *The Jews of Key West: Smugglers, Cigar Makers, and Revolutionaries: 1823-1969*, which received the 2018 Florida Book Award for Florida nonfiction. In addition to the concerns I have raised regarding the apparent encroachment of proposed Site #3 upon the US Army Corps-required "cemetery buffer zone," I wish to share my professional opinion as a historian that the Army Corps' 1991 excavation plan relied upon incomplete documentary evidence as to the whereabouts of the original burial site. The Army Corps team located human remains in the area where they expected to find them, based on an incomplete historical record including a single historical photo of the cemetery taken in 1890; however, the Corps did not do a more complete assessment which, if performed today, may turn up additional grave sites within or even beyond the cemetery buffer zone. The Corps apparently did not have access to any photographic evidence from 1890-1927, during which period the cemetery was still in use and may have expanded into areas which the Corps did not attempt to excavate.

As a result of the tremendous advances in digitization which have occurred since 1991, significant additional historical evidence has come to light in the form of maps and photographs which would allow for a more accurate archaeological and historical excavation. There is no doubt that, if the Army Corps were to investigate the site today, they would be able to draw upon a more complete historical record.

The likelihood that the cemetery holds human remains of African-American members of the US 2nd Colored Infantry imbues this site with singular significance, importance, and sensitivity. In recent years, historians, community organizations, and journalists have documented numerous African-American cemeteries throughout Florida which were improperly moved, desecrated, developed, and/or abandoned. The issue is of such serious concern statewide that Governor DeSantis appointed a 10-member Task Force on Abandoned African-American Cemeteries to develop and recommend strategies for identifying and recording cemeteries and burial grounds while preserving local history and ensuring dignity and respect for the deceased.

I propose that the City take the following actions, prior to issuing any development approvals for Site #3:

1. Clearly delineate the US Army Corps-required "cemetery buffer zone" on any maps of proposed development.
2. Invite the US Army Corps to update its "Archaeological and Historical Investigations for Proposed U.S. Navy Peary Court Housing Project Key West, Monroe County, Florida" in order to reflect extensive historical evidence which has surfaced in the more than 30 years since the original report was issued; and in light of recent scholarship regarding historic African-American cemeteries in Florida and around the US.
3. Review the Final Report of the Florida Department of State's Abandoned African-American Cemeteries Task Force and implement its recommendations.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or to discuss this further.

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**Arlo Haskell**

Executive Director

**Key West Literary Seminar**

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