

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Black Philadelphians in the Morton Cranial Collection Will Be Respectfully Laid to Rest at Eden Cemetery

PHILADELPHIA, December 21, 2023—The crania of 20 Black Philadelphians who were a part of the Samuel G. Morton Cranial Collection will be respectfully laid to rest at the historic Eden Cemetery in Collingdale, Pennsylvania. **On Saturday, February 3, 2024, at 10:00 am, local spiritual leaders will conduct an interfaith commemoration service in Harrison Auditorium at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, also known as the Penn Museum.** The ceremony will be open to the public.

Reverend J. Wendell Mapson, Jr., Imam Kenneth Nuriddin, and University of Pennsylvania Chaplain, Reverend Charles L. Howard, Ph.D. will lead the memorial service, which will culminate in a blessing at Eden Cemetery, the final resting place of 90,000 individuals and one of the earliest African-American burial grounds in the Greater Philadelphia region.

Guided by the Morton Community Advisory Group, the Penn Museum arranged for the interment, which was directed by Decree of the Philadelphia County Court of Common Pleas, Orphans' Court Division.

Little is known about the 12 women and eight men who will be respectfully laid to rest. Some resided in the Blockley Almshouse in Philadelphia at the time of their death during the early 19th century. A few archival records indicate a possible cause of death—such as tuberculosis, cholera, or stomach cancer—but none of the 20 crania show any evidence of a previous burial.

Their crania were unethically collected by physician Samuel G. Morton and his associates to provide a now-rejected scientific basis for racism. Originally housed in the Academy of Natural Sciences, where Morton served as president from 1849 until his death in 1851, the Collection consists of more than 1,300 crania from the world over. In 1966, it was transferred to the Penn Museum, which announced its intent to repatriate the Morton Collection in April 2021.

Reverend Mapson, Jr., who was previously involved with a similar effort to reinter remains from the Friends to Harmony Burial Ground, first became involved with the Morton Community Advisory Group two years ago. He will lead brief remarks and a prayer of transition during the interfaith commemoration service.

“Historically, Blacks were not valued in life or death. Black people were refused burial in White cemeteries. Therefore, it is important to lay to rest the remains of these individuals. By doing so, we recognize their personhood and that they were individuals valued by God,” said Rev. Mapson, the Pastor at Monumental Baptist Church in West Philadelphia. “In death, their voices yet speak, reminding us not to repeat the moral and ethical mistakes of the past.”

Laying to rest the Black Philadelphians was a priority recommendation from the Morton Community Advisory Group. Other recommendations include placing a permanent marker of remembrance on Penn’s campus and hosting a community-led forum as a part of steps toward restorative practices and repair.

Imam Kenneth Nuriddin, Resident Imam at Philadelphia Masjid, will also deliver remarks and a prayer of transition during the memorial service.

“It is in recognition of the need to restore the honor of human dignity to these sons and daughters of Adam that I responded to the call,” said Imam Nuriddin, who became involved with the Morton Community Advisory Group in the spring of 2022 through his connection with Glenn Bryan, the Assistant Vice President of Community Relations at Penn.

For University Chaplain, the Rev. Charles L. Howard, Ph.D., who will open the interfaith commemoration service, righting a wrong is an important part of ongoing work around equity and justice.

“Morton’s debunked research was horrible and racist. He dishonored the remains of our neighbors. While we cannot go back in time to stop what has already happened, we can reverse some of what he did,” said Chaplain Howard, who also serves the Vice President for Social Equity & Community at Penn. “I am so grateful for the leadership of Dr. Christopher Woods and the Community Advisory Group, as we are now interring the remains and calling out the wrongs of the past. As a Black man and as an alumnus of this great University, this helps to bring me some peace—as we seek to help these individuals finally rest in peace.”

In September, the Museum shared its updated [Human Remains Policy](#) following a comprehensive institutional reassessment of its practices. The policy applies to the care of the collections, teaching and research, exhibition and display, and public access.

“After nearly 200 years, these individuals are finally being returned to the Black community and laid to rest with respect. This is a small but long-overdue step towards addressing injustices that have spanned centuries,” said **Dr. Christopher Woods, Williams Director of the Penn Museum.** “I am grateful to the Morton Community Advisory Group for their leadership in creating a path forward that prioritizes the human dignity of these individuals. Museums like ours have a responsibility to reckon with the history of colonialism and racism that has shaped much of our collections. Restorative practices such as this burial ceremony, based on community consultation, are necessary to fulfill our obligation to be ethical stewards.”

Updates regarding the repatriation of the Morton Collection, including additional details about the commemoration ceremony, will be made publicly available [here](#).

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Editor’s Note: In case of inclement weather, the alternate date is Saturday, February 10, 2024.