

'Green burials' take root in the Charlotte area

WFAE | By [Claire Donnelly](#)

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Claire Donnelly/WFAE

An outdoor "chapel" at Kings Mountain Preserve, a conservation burial ground in South Carolina.

Tucked back in the woods off a gravel road in rural South Carolina is an unusual kind of graveyard.

At Kings Mountain Preserve, there are no upright headstones decorated with plastic flowers and no neatly mowed lawns. Terry Robertson, who owns the preserve, said those traditional cemetery trappings often mask a more sinister underbelly.

"It looks really beautiful. Well, that's from the ground up," Robertson said. "If you were to take a look at (from) the ground down...there's been a lot of pollution that's taken place."

The caskets and vaults that crowd many of these cemeteries don't decompose, Robertson said, and harmful chemicals used to temporarily preserve dead bodies can leach into the soil.

At Robertson's 40-acre site in Cherokee County, the focus is on nature. Gravel paths wind through the woods, connecting clearings where bodies can be buried. On a recent afternoon, sunlight slanted through mostly bare tree branches as birds sang and the creek that runs through the property gurgled.

Unlike at a traditional cemetery, everything that goes in the ground at Kings Mountain Preserve must be biodegradable. Metal caskets and concrete burial vaults are forbidden. The graves are all dug by hand — not by backhoes — and soil is left in a mound on top so it can settle naturally. The grave markers are small and made of natural river stone.



Claire Donnelly/WFAE

Kings Mountain Preserve is a 40-acre green burial cemetery in South Carolina.

“Our first burial out here, the casket was made of cedar,” Robertson said. “(We) have poplar, pine and cedar are the main types of wood. You can also choose a wicker basket.”

Scattering ashes is not allowed – Robertson said they have a high sodium content that can damage plants – but they can be buried, as long as they are mixed with compost and extra soil to minimize any potential harm.

Nine people have been buried at Kings Mountain Preserve since it opened in 2020. It’s one of about a dozen conservation burial grounds in the U.S. certified by the Green Burial Council.

In recent years, there’s been a movement toward burial sites with reduced environmental impact. Cemeteries, where dead bodies can be broken down quickly by insects and bacteria, have a smaller carbon footprint, create richer soil and keep nature in balance.

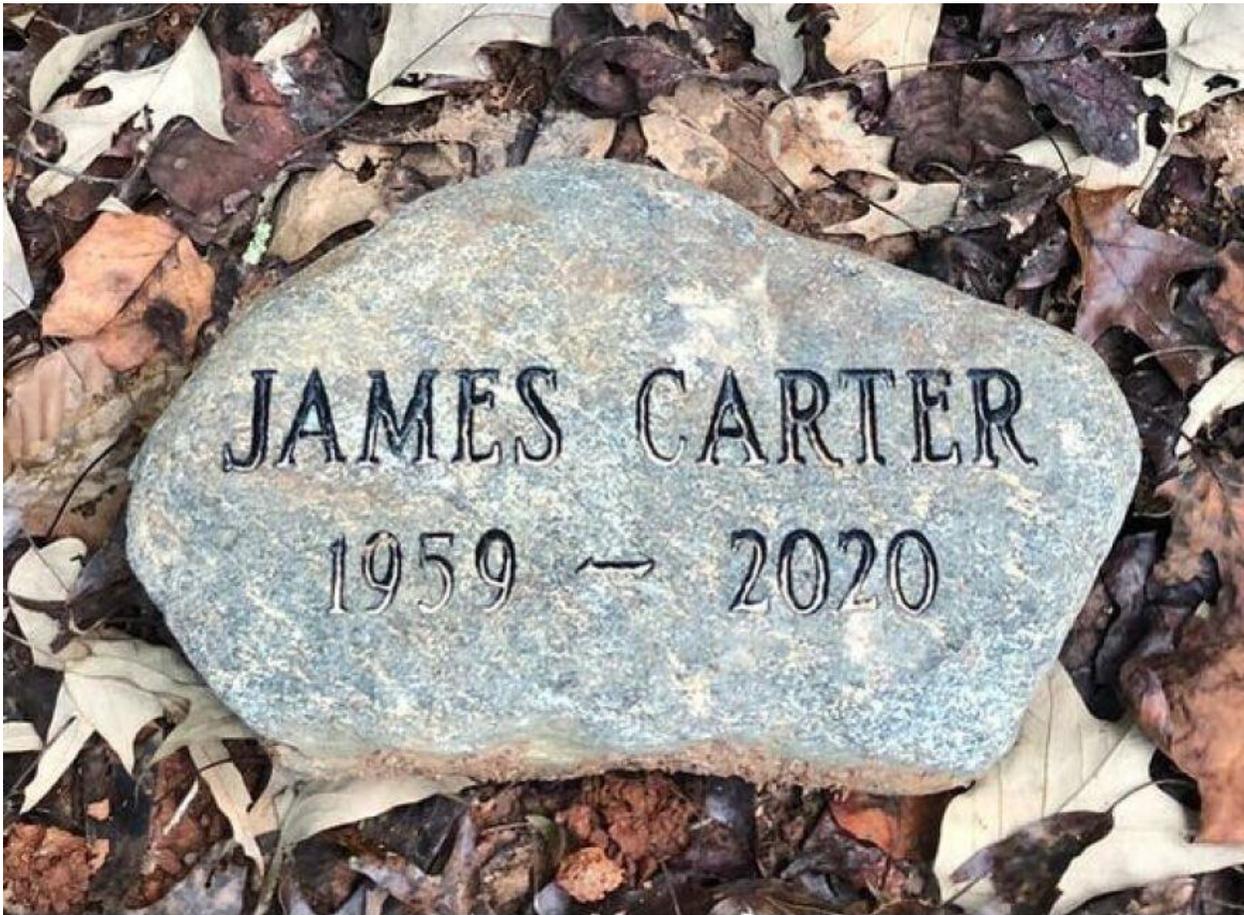
But the concept of a green burial is not a novel one, according to Kimberley Campbell. She and her husband opened a green burial cemetery just west of Greenville, South Carolina in 1998.

“There is nothing new about that. It is literally biblical,” Campbell said. “From Genesis 3:19, ‘From dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return.’”

The practice of embalming did not become popular until the Civil War, when, according to Campbell, the bodies of soldiers who had died far away from their families needed to be temporarily preserved. Campbell said “itinerant embalmers” would use chemicals, including arsenic, on the battlefield.

Robertson, whose Charlotte funeral home offers embalming, no longer performs the process himself. In 2000, he was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer in his head and neck. Doctors suspected it was caused by formaldehyde, a chemical used in the procedure.

“I went through this year and a half long process where I almost died,” Robertson said. “I was given a 30% chance to live five years. It was pretty amazing what I had to go through. But then when I got out, as you can imagine...I wasn’t a fan of embalming.”



Kings Mountain Preserve

A stone marker at Kings Mountain Preserve.

Embalmed bodies cannot be buried at Kings Mountain Preserve.

Demand for more environmentally-conscious burials at places like Robertson’s preserve has “definitely increased” in the past 20 years, according to Ed Bixby, president of the Green Burial Council. Some traditional cemeteries even offer special sections for green burials. Bixby said the increased interest could be driven in part because they’re cheaper than a traditional burial.

“Nationally, a traditional funeral averages around \$12,000,” Bixby said. “Typically you can find a natural burial across the country – with the cemetery, with the funeral director, with all of the products involved – for about \$5,000 to \$6,000 total.”

For Campbell, the pull to reconnect with nature as part of a funeral is spiritual.

“It’s amazing seeing people in nature – the living and the dead – and how healing nature can be,” she said.

As for Robertson, he has already picked out his plot at Kings Mountain Preserve. He and his wife will eventually join another family member – their beloved cat, Gary, who’s already buried in the preserve’s pet cemetery.



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Claire Donnelly is WFAE's health reporter. She previously worked at NPR member station KGOU in Oklahoma and also interned at WBEZ in Chicago and WAMU in Washington, D.C. She holds a master's degree in journalism from Northwestern University and attended college at the University of Virginia, where she majored in Comparative Literature and Spanish. Claire is originally from Richmond, Virginia. Reach her at cdonnelly@wfae.org or on Twitter [@donnellyclairee](https://twitter.com/donnellyclairee).

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