

# Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery Conceptual Site Master Plan



Prepared for Helping Hand Cemetery Club  
August 2021

Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery  
Conceptual Site Master Plan

Project funding provided in part by the US Forest Service in cooperation with the  
Virginia Department of Forestry Urban and Community Forestry Program



20UCF08



Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery  
Conceptual Site Master Plan

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**The Community Design Assistance Center (CDAC)** is an outreach center in the College of Architecture and Urban Studies at Virginia Tech that assists communities, neighborhood groups and non-profit organizations in improving the natural and built environments. Assistance is provided in the areas of landscape architecture, architecture, planning, and interior design. Working with communities, the conceptual planning and design provides communities with a graphic vision of their project that can then be used for grant applications and fundraising for the next steps toward implementation.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The CDAC team would like to acknowledge the following individuals for their contributions throughout the project:

**Alton Darden**  
HHCC, Member

**Wallace Maurice Darden**  
HHCC, Member

**Dolores Peterson**  
HHCC, Member

**Bob Barnes**  
HHC Maintenance Coordinator

and

Those who volunteered time for the betterment of the  
Helping Hand Cemetery in Courtland.

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## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### Helping Hand Cemetery Background

Established through a deed signed May 27, 1897 by former slaves of Southampton County, the historic Helping Hand Cemetery in Courtland, Virginia began as a burial ground for former slaves, sharecroppers, free people of color, and Native Americans from the Nottaway tribe. When established, the cemetery was called The Courtland Colored Cemetery. In 1913 after the Helping Hand Club Trustees purchased additional land and took over ownership and management, the cemetery was renamed as The Helping Hand Cemetery (HHC).

It is estimated that there are more than 500 Black people buried in the cemetery including Southampton County residents, veterans from the Civil War to Vietnam; a Native American family and descendants; heroes from the police force; and members of the early African-American community of Courtland representing black entrepreneurs, musicians, religious and social activists.

On December 12, 2019, HHC was designated a historic site both on the Commonwealth of Virginia and National Registries under the Courtland Historic District.

The Helping Hand Cemetery is managed by the Helping Hand Cemetery Club (HHCC), which is a non-profit, tax-exempt organization. The mission of the HHCC is to improve and to maintain the cemetery as a peaceful, dignified, safe, and beautiful place worthy of its historical recognition. HHC is the link to the legacy and heritage of the African-American community of Courtland. In addition, HHCC's mission is to receive and to acquire additions to the cemetery and to sell lots and burial rights therein.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### Project Description

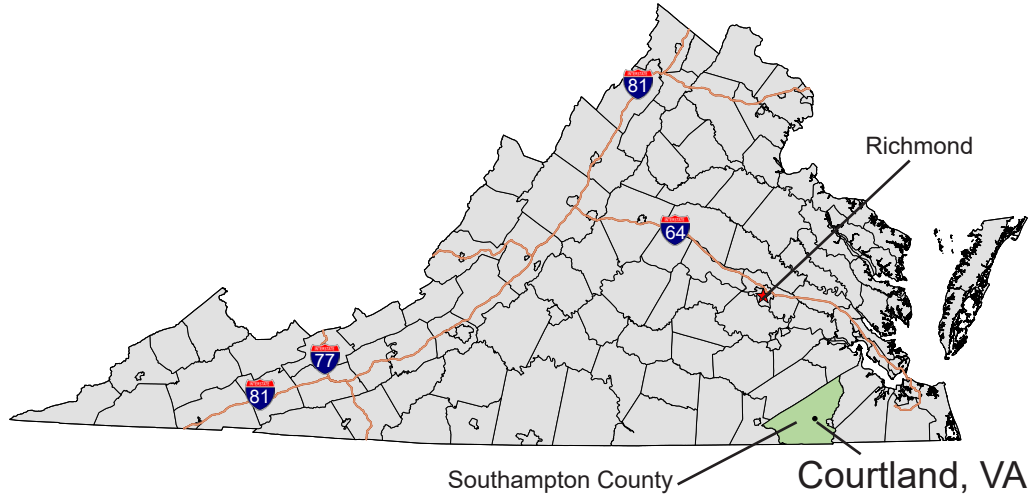
The Helping Hand Cemetery Club has been involved in a number of projects to date to improve the cemetery, including in part, continued maintenance, obtaining a grant through the VA Department of Historic Resources for the upkeep of the cemetery grounds, obtaining a grant through the ‘400 Years of African American History Commission’ program for a program called Sharing Their Stories, which will honor those interred in Helping Hand Cemetery by connecting their lives with Courtland’s early 1900s African-American community, and planning for the 125th Anniversary celebration.

The purpose of this project was to work with the Helping Hand Cemetery Club to improve the appearance and pedestrian accessibility of the historic cemetery. CDAC worked with the HHCC to create a site master plan for the cemetery that focuses on enhancing the aesthetic appearance by incorporating low-maintenance landscaping and pedestrian circulation routes. The site master plan includes the approximate location of site amenities such as benches, welcome kiosk, supplemental fencing, etc.

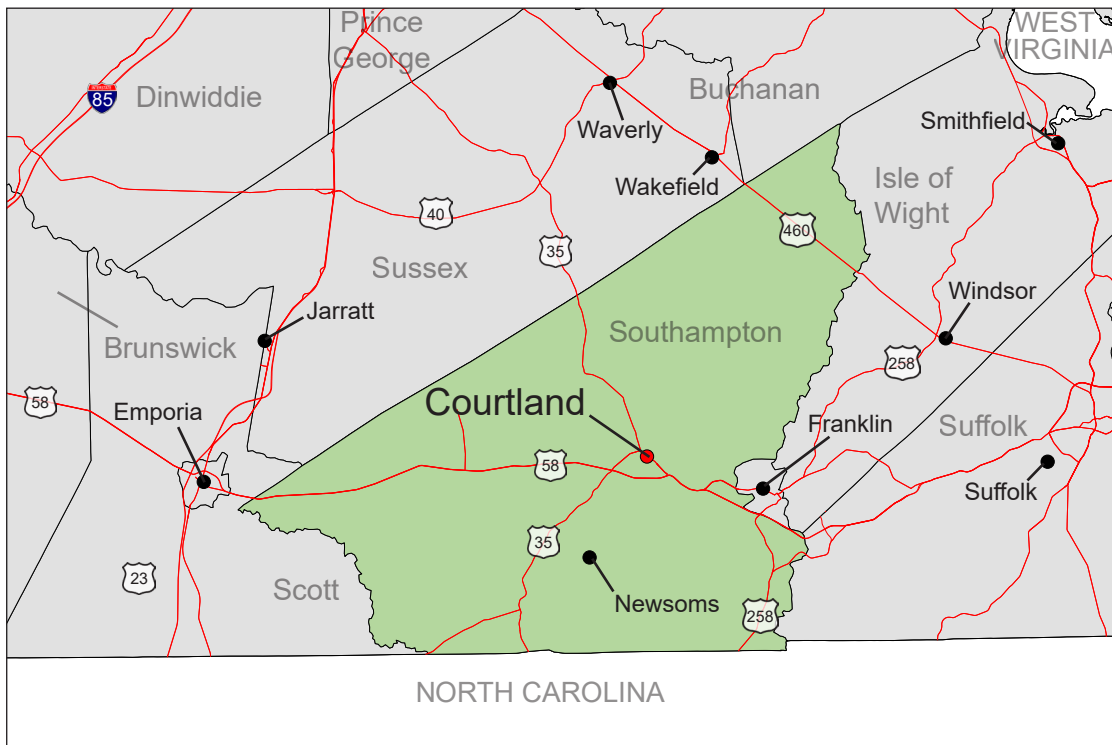
In conjunction with CDAC’s conceptual design work, the HHCC worked with the Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF) on a health and risk assessment for the existing trees located in the cemetery. A separate report contains Virginia DOF’s findings.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

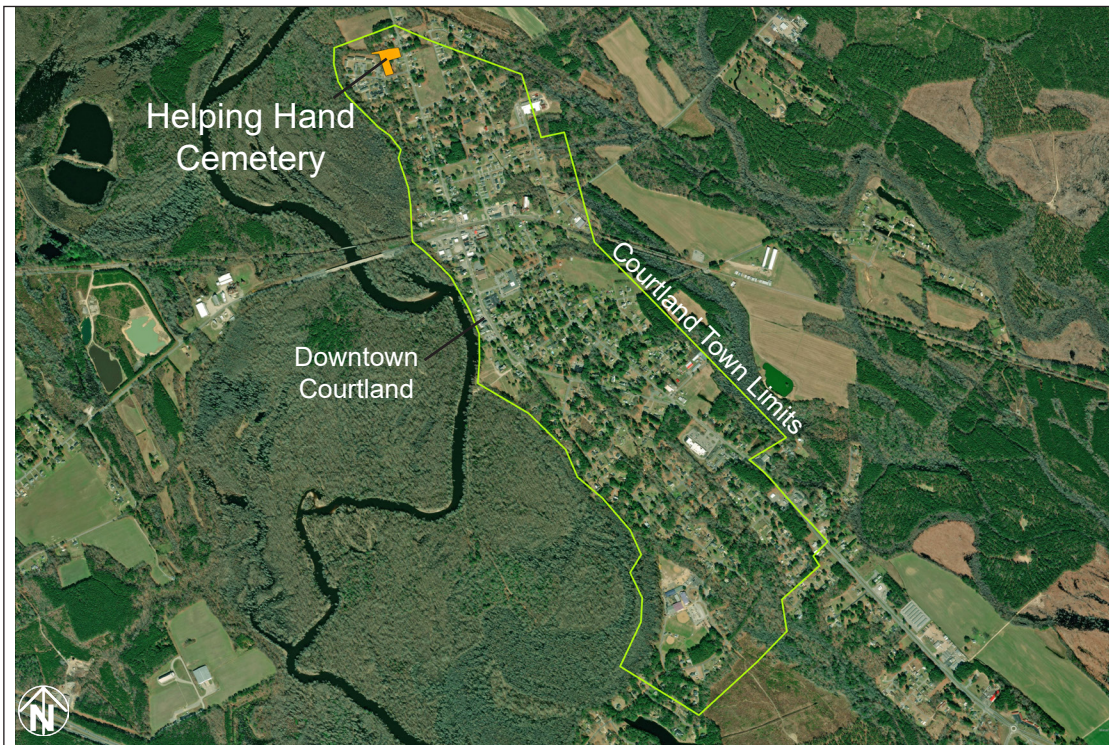
### Project Location



The maps above/below and the aerials on the following pages show the location of Southampton County within southeast Virginia, where the Town of Courtland is located within the county, and the location of the Helping Hand Cemetery along Main Street in Courtland.

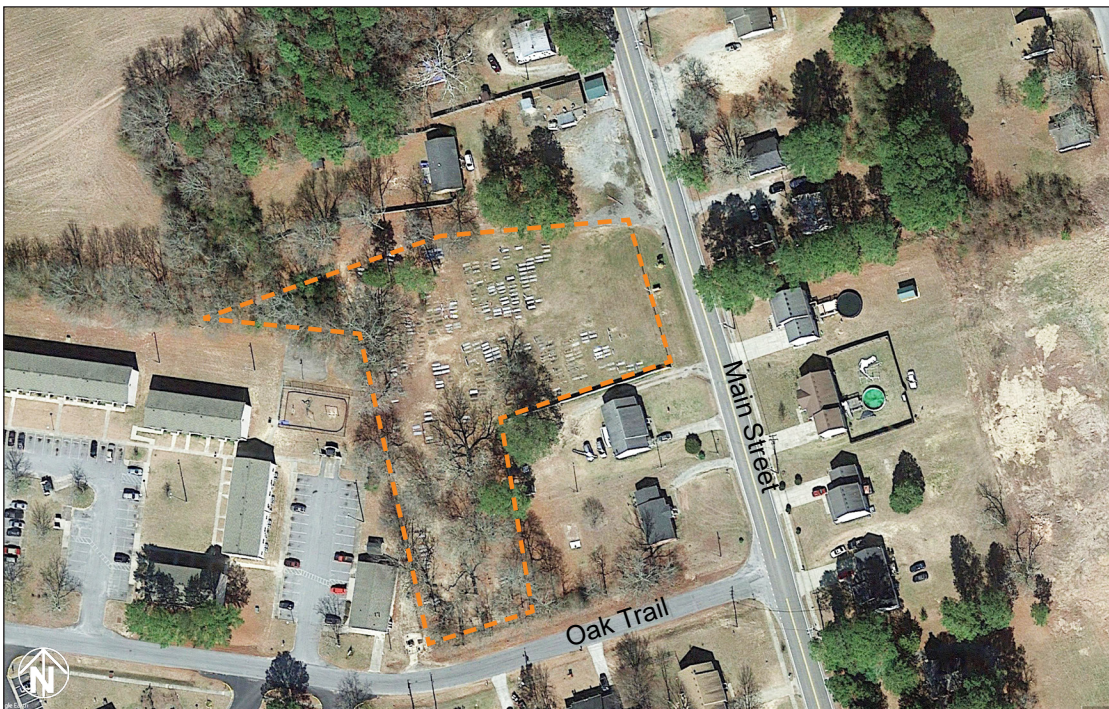


## PROJECT DESCRIPTION



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The Helping Hand Cemetery is located on the north side of Courtland (above). The cemetery is approximately 1.7 acres and is adjacent to Main Street (below).



## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### Design Process

The design process began with a site visit on April 7, 2021. During that visit the CDAC team and members of the Helping Hand Cemetery Club discussed their broad vision for the entire property and learned of various improvements that had been recently made. The site visit was followed by a stakeholder input session on May 19, 2021 via Zoom. Input and site photos created a comprehensive foundation that the CDAC team used to develop a preliminary conceptual site master plan for the cemetery.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the design team presented the preliminary design concept virtually on July 13, 2021. Following the presentation, HHCC members provided feedback about what they (dis)liked about the design. The final design concept was presented virtually on August 17, 2021.

Meeting notes from the stakeholder input session can be found in the Appendix.



The CDAC team met members of the Helping Hand Cemetery Club on April 7, 2021.

Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery  
Conceptual Site Master Plan

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# PART 1: FINAL DESIGN CONCEPT

## FINAL DESIGN

### Site Master Plan

#### Design Description

The final site master plan provides an overall vision for the Helping Hand Cemetery. The site master plan defines a primary pedestrian entrance area by adding a signature welcome kiosk, brick piers, and fencing. Supplemental learning opportunities are added where visitors can learn about the history of the cemetery and the individuals that are buried there.

#### Welcome Kiosk, Memorial Bricks, and Brick Piers

A new brick welcome kiosk is proposed near the entrance to the cemetery. This kiosk, along with two brick piers, provide a dedicated area where pedestrians enter the cemetery. The welcome kiosk contains a cemetery map, burial directory, space for pamphlets, and historical information.

Surrounding the welcome kiosk is a concrete pad. This pad has a border created from memorial bricks that are inlaid within the concrete. The memorial bricks contain the names of special loved ones and can be used as a fundraiser to help offset maintenance expenses.

#### Walking Trail

A walking trail is proposed within the cemetery to provide greater pedestrian access throughout the cemetery. The walking trail, made of compacted crushed stone, starts at the welcome kiosk and branches in two directions. The first is a path that heads south before veering west through the middle of the cemetery. The second path from the welcome kiosk heads west before turning south. The two intersect in the middle of the cemetery. This intersection has two historical markers that can highlight certain individuals or historical information about the cemetery. A short spur trail provides pedestrian access to the southern most portions of the cemetery.

Finally, benches are located throughout the walking trail system for resting or reflection. If desired, families can sponsor a bench in the name of a loved one.

Special note: The layout of the walking trail is approximate. The exact location must be field-located in order to avoid potential grave sites.

#### Additional Fencing and Supplemental Planting

There currently is a partial fence system that goes around the cemetery. There is a simple metal fence along Main Street. The site master plan proposes that this fence continues along the easement on the north side of the cemetery to discourage vehicles from entering the central portion of the cemetery without permission. A 12' lockable gate is added in the north section to allow periodic access for service vehicles.

Perennial plantings are added primarily along the fence that goes along the east edge of cemetery that parallels Main Street. These plantings help soften the existing

## FINAL DESIGN


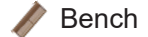

metal fence while enhancing the aesthetic appeal along the road. Perennial pollinator species can be selected to minimize maintenance and increase ecological value of the site.

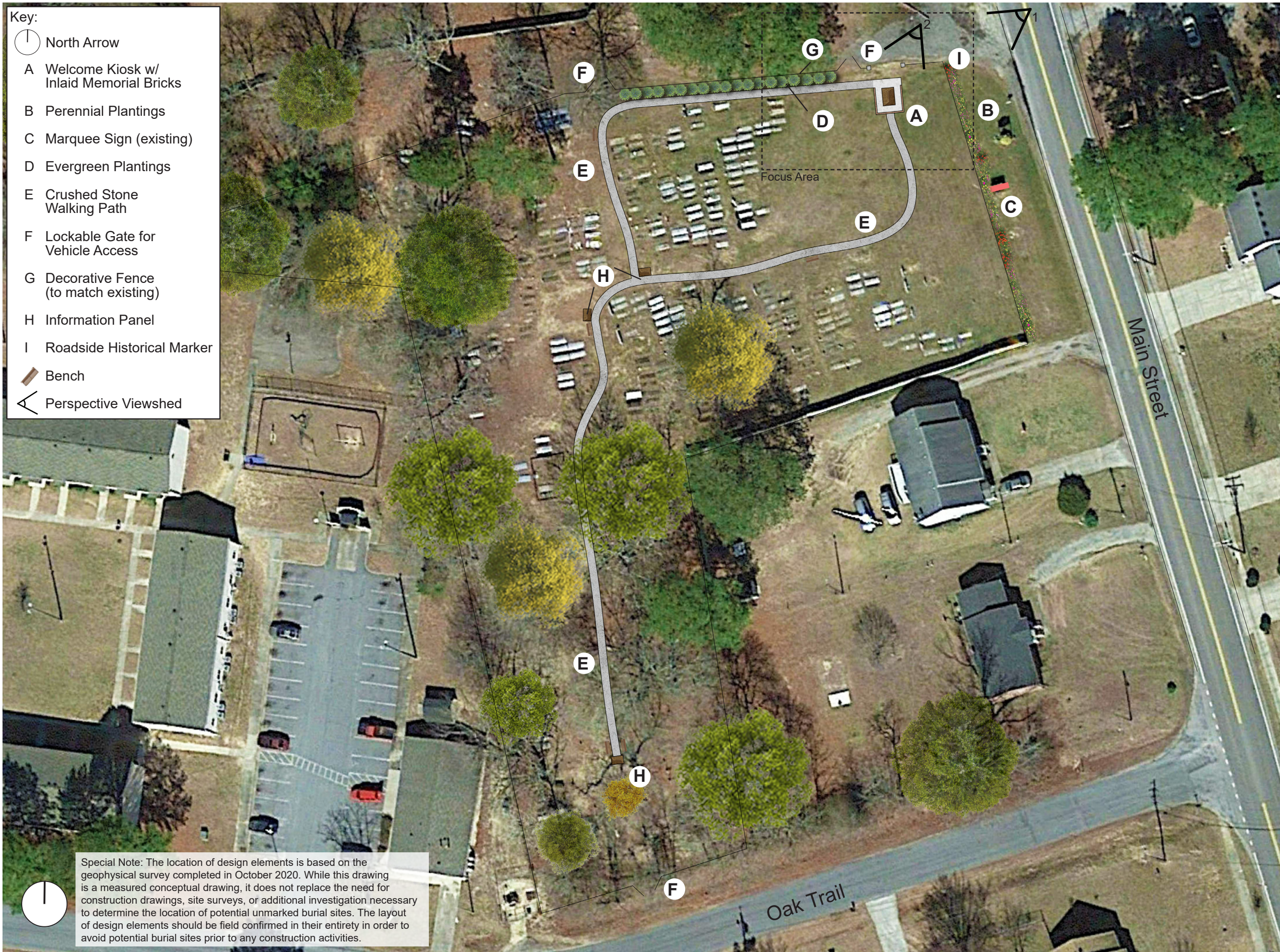
In addition to the perennial pollinator plants along the east fence, low-growing evergreen shrubs are planted along the proposed fence that follows the easement on the north side of the cemetery. These evergreen shrubs are low maintenance yet provide year-round color.

Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery  
Conceptual Site Master Plan

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- Key:
-  North Arrow
  - A Welcome Kiosk w/ Inlaid Memorial Bricks
  - B Perennial Plantings
  - C Marquee Sign (existing)
  - D Evergreen Plantings
  - E Crushed Stone Walking Path
  - F Lockable Gate for Vehicle Access
  - G Decorative Fence (to match existing)
  - H Information Panel
  - I Roadside Historical Marker
  -  Bench
  -  Perspective Viewshed



Special Note: The location of design elements is based on the geophysical survey completed in October 2020. While this drawing is a measured conceptual drawing, it does not replace the need for construction drawings, site surveys, or additional investigation necessary to determine the location of potential unmarked burial sites. The layout of design elements should be field confirmed in their entirety in order to avoid potential burial sites prior to any construction activities.




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Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery Conceptual Site Master Plan

Final Design Concept  
Site Master Plan  
August 17, 2021

- Key:
-  North Arrow
  - A Welcome Kiosk
  - B Inlaid Memorial Bricks
  - C Concrete Pad
  - D Brick Pier
  - E Perennial Plantings
  - F Evergreen Plantings
  - G Crushed Stone Walking Path
  - H Lockable Gate for Vehicle Access
  - I Decorative Fence (to match existing)
  - J Roadside Historical Marker



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Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery Conceptual Site Master Plan

Final Design Concept  
Focus Area  
August 17, 2021



Perspective 1: Cemetery Entrance  
 The Helping Hand Cemetery entrance from Main Street is enhanced with additional perennial planting along the existing fence, supplemental fencing, brick pillars, and welcome kiosk.



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Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery Conceptual Site Master Plan

Final Design Concept  
 Perspective 1: Cemetery Entrance  
 August 17, 2021



Perspective 2: Welcome Kiosk

A new welcome kiosk marks the pedestrian entrance to the Helping Hand Cemetery. The welcome kiosk has panels that contain information about the history of the cemetery, a map of the cemetery layout and sub-sections, and a burial directory. The pedestrian entrance is emphasized by two brick pillars and a simple metal fence. Memorial bricks are located around the perimeter of the concrete slab.



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Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery Conceptual Site Master Plan

Final Design Concept  
Perspective 2: Welcome Kiosk  
August 17, 2021



Perspective 3: Walking Trail

A simple ADA-compliant crushed stone path provides a dedicated pedestrian route through the cemetery. Small pedestal-style kiosks can be added along the trail to display historical information, highlight individuals, or share information about the broader African American community in the area. There is a 12' gate in the fence on the left near the entrance for service vehicles to enter the cemetery.



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Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery Conceptual Site Master Plan

Final Design Concept  
Perspective 3: Walking Trail  
August 17, 2021



A welcome kiosk is a great opportunity to highlight the cemetery's history or provide a directory of the cemetery layout. The welcome kiosk should be inviting and informative.



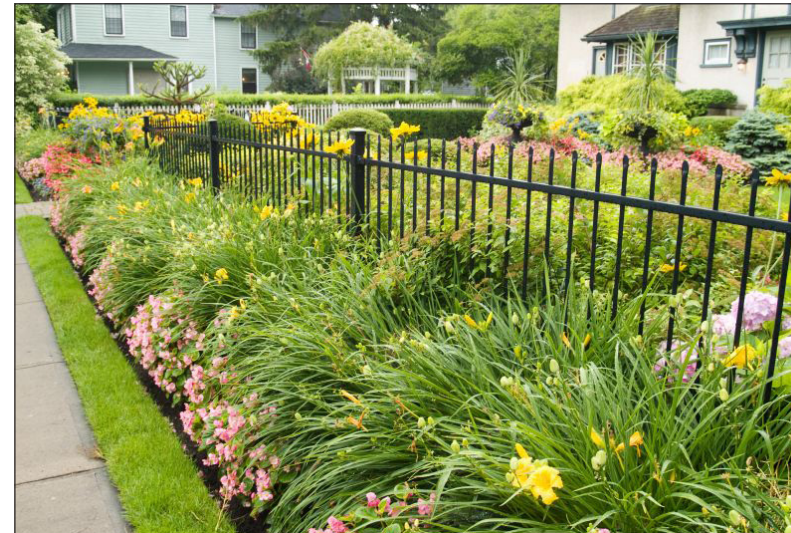
A secondary pedestal-style kiosk can be used in various location along the walking trail. This small kiosks could highlight certain individuals that are of unique importance to the cemetery.



A small evergreen hedge row can be used in place of or in addition to traditional fencing to minimize unwanted vehicle traffic in the cemetery.



Any future fencing or gates should match the existing fence style that is located along Main Street.



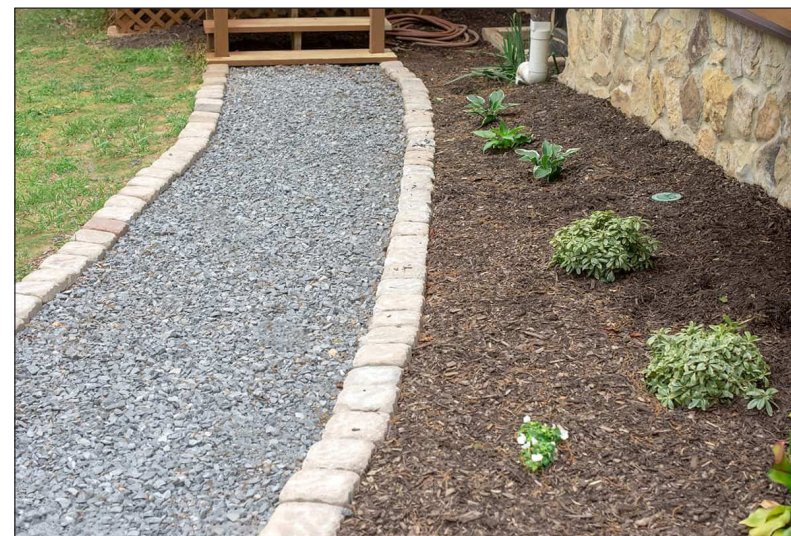
Perennial plantings offer a low maintenance planting solution and can soften existing or future fencing in the cemetery.



Memorial bricks can border the concrete area surrounding the welcome kiosk.



Memorial benches can be added along the walking path. The memorial benches can be used to raise funds for the cemetery while also commemorating a lost loved one.



A fine crushed stone or gravel path is an economical path material that provides long term durability. A simple brick border using memorial bricks could be added later if desired.



A gate with a 12' opening can allow restricted vehicle access to the cemetery's interior for funerals or other special maintenance needs.



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Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery Conceptual Site Master Plan

Final Design Concept  
Precedent Images  
August 17, 2021

## FINAL DESIGN CONCEPT

### Planting Suggestions

#### Design Description

##### Pollinator Plantings

Pollinator plants are interspersed throughout the site master plan but are most notably located along the metal fence along Main Street on the eastern edge of the cemetery. The pollinator plant selection assists in boosting the site's ecological variety and plant value. The selected plants are native to Virginia and many self-seed and spread easily. While they require maintenance following initial planting, native plants/pollinator-friendly perennial plant species will soon establish and require minimal maintenance. Keeping a mowed edge will help contain the pollinator plants once they are established and provide a crisp edge condition.

##### Tree Plantings

With the exception of low-growing evergreen shrubs located along the north section of the metal fencing, all of the tree cover shown in the proposed site master plan is existing tree cover. As the existing trees reach maturity and/or develop poor health, it is important to develop a replacement plan that incorporates species that are appropriate for the site. New tree plantings or replacing those that must be removed is important in order to provide additional shade. The trees can also be utilized as part of environmental education opportunities through a partnership with the Virginia Department of Forestry's area rangers or Virginia Master Naturalists.

CDAC strongly encourages the Helping Hand Cemetery Club to work with representatives from the Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOF). This office an excellent resource for tree species selection, placement on the site, tree protection protocols during construction activities, and long term management of mature forests.

Contact information for the VDOF Campbell County Senior Area Forester:

Stephen Jasenak, Forester  
Virginia Department of Forestry  
757-653-2777  
21615 Governor Darnden Road  
Courtland, VA 23837

The following pages contain images and plant information for evergreen shrubs options and pollinator species.

NOTE: Soil samples were not taken in the course of this project. Soil samples should be taken prior to installing any plant material to verify proper growing conditions.

Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery  
Conceptual Site Master Plan

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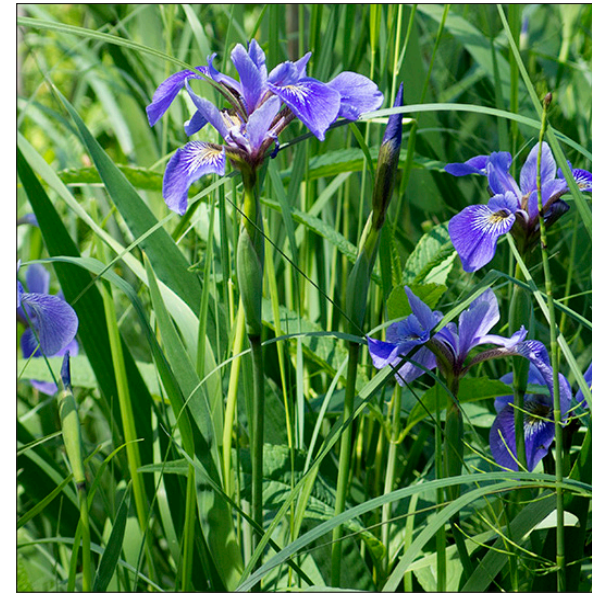
**Nana Boxwood, *Buxus sinica var. insularis 'Nana'***  
 Best grown in average, medium moisture, well-drained soil in full sun to part shade. This boxwood variety is a dense, compact, many-branched, broad, mounded evergreen shrub and is resistant to the boxwood blight. Tolerates heavy pruning.  
 Height: 2 to 2.5 feet  
 Spread: 3 to 4 feet  
 Bloom Time: April  
 Bloom Description: Greenish yellow  
 Sun: Full sun to part shade  
 Water: Medium  
 Maintenance: Medium  
 Suggested Use: Hedge



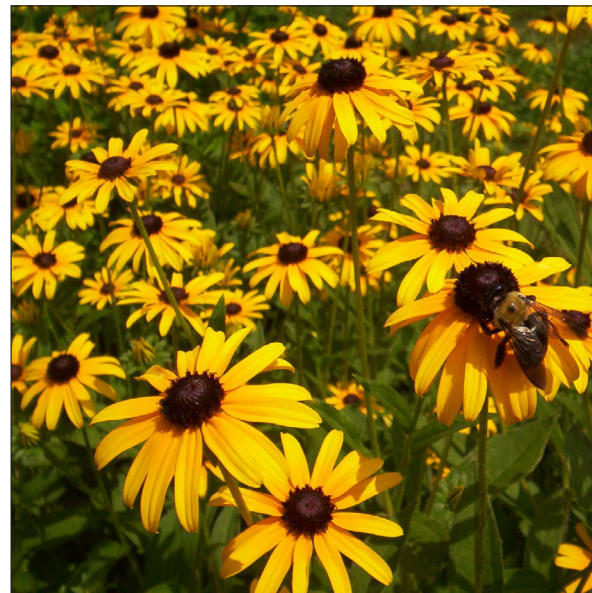
**Bee Balm, *Monarda didyma***  
 Prefers rich, humusy soils in full sun, although some afternoon shade is appreciated in hot summer climates. Does best in well-draining conditions, but can tolerate heavier clay.  
 Height: 2 to 4 feet  
 Spread: 2 to 3 feet  
 Bloom Time: July to August  
 Bloom Description: Red  
 Sun: Full sun to part shade  
 Water: Medium to wet  
 Maintenance: Medium  
 Suggested Use: Herb, Native Planting, Rain Garden



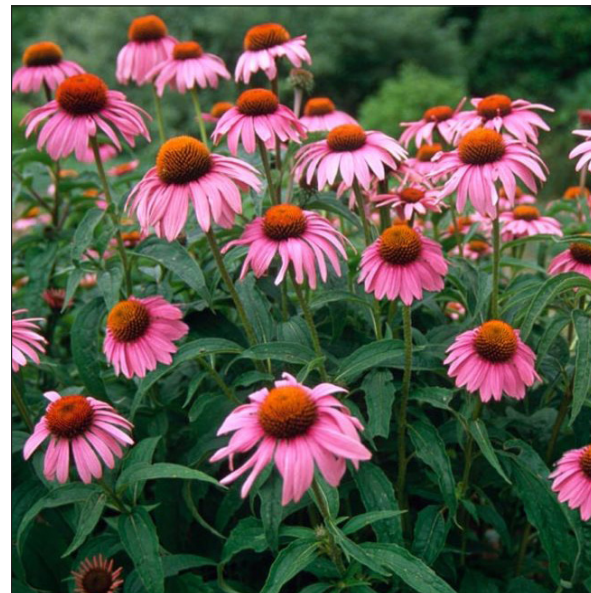
**Lavender, *Lavandula angustifolia***  
 Easily grown in average, medium moisture, well-drained soils in full sun to part shade. Best flowering in full sun. Prefers moist, acidic, organically rich soils. Little pruning is required. Prune in early spring if necessary. Shrub borders, woodland gardens.  
 Height: 2 to 3 feet  
 Spread: 2 to 4 feet  
 Bloom Time: June to August  
 Bloom Description: Purple  
 Sun: Full sun  
 Water: Dry to medium  
 Maintenance: Medium  
 Suggested Use: Herb



**Southern Blue Flag Iris, *Iris virginica***  
*Iris virginica*, is native to Virginia. It typically grows to 2' tall (less frequently to 3') and features non-fragrant violet-blue flowers with falls that are crested with yellow and white.  
 Height: 1 to 3 feet  
 Spread: 1 to 3 feet  
 Bloom Time: June  
 Bloom Description: Violet blue with yellow  
 Sun: Full sun  
 Water: Medium to wet  
 Maintenance: Low  
 Suggested Use: Native Planting



**Black-Eyed Susans, *Rudbeckia hirta***  
 It is easily grown in average, medium moisture, well-drained soils in full sun. Best in moist, organically rich soils. Tolerates heat, drought and a wide range of soils except poorly-drained wet ones.  
 Height: 2 to 3 feet  
 Spread: 1 to 2 feet  
 Bloom Time: June to September  
 Bloom Description: Yellow to orange-yellow rays  
 Sun: Full sun  
 Water: Medium  
 Maintenance: Low  
 Suggested Use: Annual, Native Planting



**Cone Flower (Echinacea), *Echinacea purpurea***  
 Easily grown in average, dry to medium, well-drained soil in full sun to part shade. Best in full sun. An adaptable plant that is tolerant of drought, heat, humidity and poor soil. Divide clumps when they become overcrowded (about every 4 years).  
 Height: 2 to 5 feet  
 Spread: 1 to 2 feet  
 Bloom Time: June to August  
 Bloom Description: Purplish pink  
 Sun: Full sun to part shade  
 Water: Dry to medium  
 Maintenance: Low  
 Suggested Use: Native Planting



**Butterfly Weed, *Asclepias tuberosa***  
 Easily grown in average, dry to medium, well-drained soils in full sun. New growth tends to emerge late in the spring. Plants are easily grown from seed, but are somewhat slow to establish and may take 2-3 years to produce flowers.  
 Height: 1 to 2 feet  
 Spread: 0.5 to 1 foot  
 Bloom Time: June to August  
 Bloom Description: Yellow/orange  
 Sun: Full sun  
 Water: Dry to medium  
 Maintenance: Low  
 Suggested Use: Native Planting, Rain Garden



**Daffodil, *Narcissus 'MartINETTE'***  
 Easily grown in average, medium moisture, well-drained soils in full sun to part shade. They are a mainstay of the spring garden. No serious insect or disease problems.  
 Height: 1 to 2 feet  
 Spread: 0.5 to 1 foot  
 Bloom Time: March to April  
 Bloom Description: Lemon yellow petals  
 Sun: Full sun to part shade  
 Water: Medium  
 Maintenance: Low  
 Suggested Use: Native Planting



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Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery Conceptual Site Master Plan

Final Design Concept  
 Planting Suggestions  
 August 17, 2021

# PART 2: EXISTING CONDITIONS

## EXISTING CONDITIONS

### Site Overview

The Helping Hand Cemetery is an existing cemetery that was originally established in 1897. The cemetery remains an active cemetery and has modern grave sites. The cemetery has about 50/50 cleared and wooded and can be quite warm in the open areas when walking around.

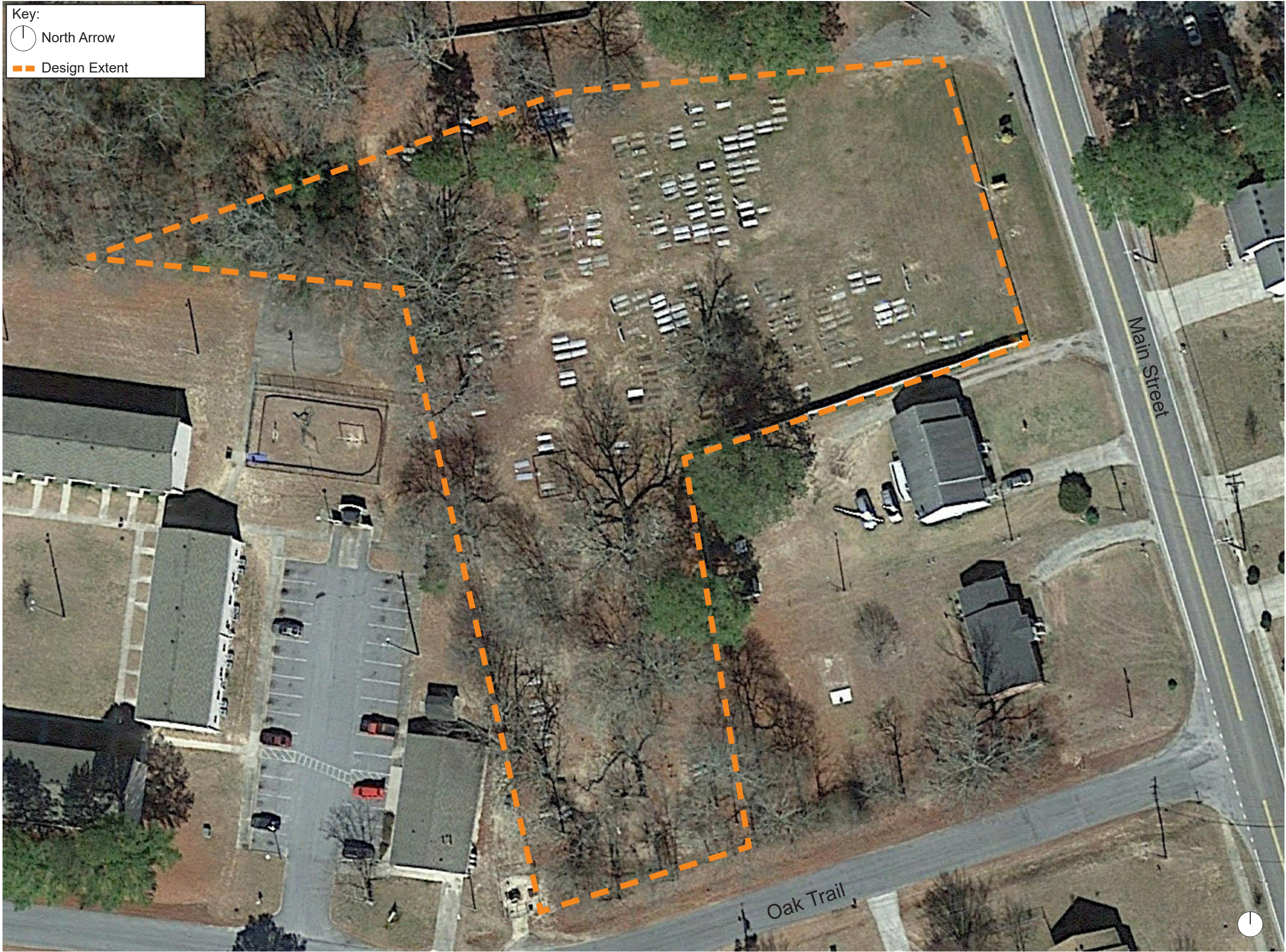
A unique aspect of the site is that the cemetery contains many unmarked graves. A recent ground penetrating radar helped identify those unmarked graves and also discovered areas that could *potentially* have grave sites but were not a certain.

The vehicle access to the cemetery is quite limited. While there is a vehicle entrance to the cemetery from Main Street, there is not a formal parking lot since the land to the north where parking would take place is privately owned.

There are few formal barriers that separate vehicles from the cemetery. There is fencing in certain places around the cemetery but there is concern that unauthorized vehicles could enter the center portion of the cemetery. Other existing site features include a marquee sign with space for memorial bricks, a simple metal fence along Main Street, and a flag pole.

The following pages contain a site aerial and existing site images.

Key:  
 North Arrow  
 Design Extent



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**Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery Conceptual Site Master Plan**

Preliminary Design Presentation

Site Aerial

July 13, 2021



The informal entrance to the Helping Hand Cemetery from Main Street.



There is a space that does not appear to have grave sites near the entrance that might be suitable for a welcome kiosk.



The cemetery is marked by a marquee sign, simple metal fence, flag pole, and memorial bricks (behind the sign).



Helping Hand Cemetery facing east. Newly discovered grave sites are marked with white flags.



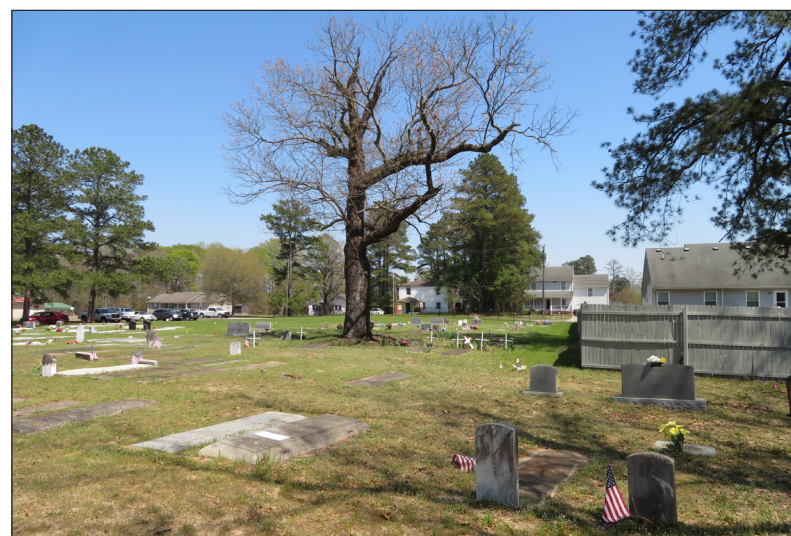
Helping Hand Cemetery facing east.



Helping Hand Cemetery facing south. Apartment buildings to the west can be seen in the background.



There is an area in the west portion of the cemetery that has recently had the brush removed.



The health of several trees in the cemetery is unknown and should be evaluated by the Virginia Department of Forestry.



There is a small area for memorial bricks but the area is not well connected with the rest of the cemetery.



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Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery Conceptual Site Master Plan

Preliminary Design Presentation

Site Images

July 13, 2021

# PART 3: PRELIMINARY DESIGN CONCEPT

## PRELIMINARY DESIGN

### Site Master Plan

#### Design Description




The preliminary site master plan proposes a dedicated pedestrian entrance and welcome kiosk for the Helping Hand Cemetery. The preliminary conceptual site master plan also enhances pedestrian access and opportunities for rest and reflection while visiting. The preliminary concept largely remained the same between the preliminary and final design presentation. A detailed concept description of the final design can be found on page 14.

The primary difference between the preliminary and final versions of the site master plan is the layout and style of the welcome kiosk. The welcome kiosk in the preliminary design is a “walk-thru” style, where visitors move through the welcome kiosk. This kiosk has two double-sided panels on either side. The double-sided panels allow visitors to see a total of four panels and move around the structure. The open nature of the preliminary kiosk style is inviting and encourages visitors to move through the kiosk and into the cemetery. Corresponding descriptions of other site elements can be found in the final design section.

The following pages contain the preliminary site master plan, perspectives, precedent images, and planting suggestions.

Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery  
Conceptual Site Master Plan

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- Key:
-  North Arrow
  - A Welcome Kiosk w/ Memorial Bricks
  - B Perennial Plantings
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Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery Conceptual Site Master Plan

Preliminary Design Concept  
Site Master Plan

July 13, 2021



Existing



Perspective 1: Cemetery Entrance

The Helping Hand Cemetery entrance from Main Street is enhanced with additional perennial planting along the existing fence, supplemental fencing, brick pillars, and welcome kiosk.



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Disclaimer : This drawing is conceptual and was prepared to show approximate location and arrangement of site features. It is subject to change and is not intended to replace the use of construction documents. The client should consult appropriate professionals before any construction or site work is undertaken. The Community Design Assistance Center is not responsible for the inappropriate use of this drawing.

Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery Conceptual Site Master Plan

Preliminary Design Concept  
Perspective 1: Cemetery Entrance  
July 13, 2021



Perspective 2: Welcome Kiosk  
 A new welcome kiosk marks the pedestrian entrance to the Helping Hand Cemetery. The welcome kiosk has two double-sided information boards that contain information about the history of the cemetery, a map of the cemetery layout and sub-sections, and a burial directory. The pedestrian entrance is emphasized by two brick pillars and a simple metal fence. Memorial bricks are located around the concrete slab.



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Courtland, VA: Helping Hand Cemetery Conceptual Site Master Plan

Preliminary Design Concept  
 Perspective 2: Welcome Kiosk  
 July 13, 2021

**PART 4:  
APPENDIX**

## APPENDIX

### Meeting Notes

#### Input Session

May 19, 2021

Online meeting via Zoom

- Initial Design Ideas
  - Enhanced pedestrian access throughout the cemetery such as a simple, ADA-friendly walking path.
  - Sitting benches
  - Welcome kiosk
    - Ability for family members to find family members
  - Supplemental signage such as memorial plaques or pedestal-style kiosks
  - Incorporate fundraising bricks closer to the welcome kiosk
  - Vehicle access
    - No access into central space
    - Potentially use evergreens near new fencing
- Planting
  - Don't block view of marquee
  - Low planting along the fence that is adjacent to Main Street (on Main Street side that would soften the look of the fence)
    - Low maintenance
    - Perennial
    - Evergreen hedges; low growing
- Tree care
  - Need to develop a better understanding of how healthy the existing trees are and how to manage certain trees that might pose a health/safety risk to the general public.
  - The Helping Hand Cemetery Club should follow up with VA Department of Forestry to schedule an on-site risk assessment.
    - Need to know best place to locate kiosk for highest visibility