



## Dorothy Spruill Redford

August 7, 1943 - September 30, 2023

Dorothy Louise Spruill Redford, born in Columbia, North Carolina, was the youngest daughter of Grady Vernon and Eddie Louise Littlejohn Spruill. There were seven Spruill siblings: Fred, Lenora, Lethia, Grady, Dorothy, Rudolph, and James. Dorothy is survived by her brother Rudolph, daughter Deborah Reid Murphy; grandchildren, Julyen Murphy and Jordan Murphy; and great-grandson, Jamari Murphy. She was also blessed to have an extended family of nieces, nephews, and cousins.

Dorothy spent part of her early childhood in Jamaica, Queens with her maternal Uncle Fred and Aunt Dorothy Littlejohn. Her early years in the diverse neighborhood of Queens, shaped a world view that would continue to evolve throughout her life. She returned to Portsmouth, Virginia for junior high school and attended Crestwood High School in Chesapeake, Virginia where she excelled academically. After graduation from high school, Dorothy attended Queens College in New York, but ultimately returned to Portsmouth with her daughter, Deborah. In Portsmouth, she began a career as a social worker, first in Chesapeake, Virginia, and then with the Portsmouth Department of Social Services.

It was during this time that Dorothy and Deborah watched Alex Haley's television mini-series *Roots*. With the conclusion of the series, Dorothy started spending weekend and evening hours in Virginia and North Carolina genealogical search rooms to uncover her family's history. Her research revealed a connection to Somerset Place and the 21 enslaved families associated with the site. Dorothy imagined a gathering of their descendants. On August 30, 1986, 2,000 descendants of enslaved laborers and slave holders gathered for the first of two Homecomings. The international coverage of the event led to a book offer by Doubleday Publishers, based in New York City.

After the publication of *Somerset Homecoming*, Redford's biographical account of her discoveries, Dorothy began a career as site manager with the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources. Her first efforts were to write new scripts for Somerset tour guides and later she initiated archeological digs to gather artifacts that illuminated the lives of the enslaved community. On-going consultations with scholars further developed the historical

accuracy of the site. Her work resulted in the reconstruction of three buildings, including the first interpreted slave hospital in the United States. Lewis and Judy's home, built in 1997, was one of the original 23 living quarters for enslaved laborers. Dorothy Redford believed, "Many historic sites unconsciously relegate the contributions of enslaved Blacks to a minor footnote in America's history, by turning solely to drama, special seasonal programs, films, and publications rather than permanent structures to tell the African American story. "

Redford used every opportunity to advocate for an inclusive approach to historical interpretation. She served on the boards of Monticello and Fort Monroe and received numerous awards including the John Tyler Award for the Humanities, the Congressional Black Associates Carter G. Woodson Award, Portsmouth Notables Award, and she was granted an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from East Carolina University.

Dorothy Redford worked at Somerset Place for 20 years, retiring in September of 2008, when Governor Michael Easley proclaimed her a recipient of The Order of the Long Leaf Pine.

After retiring as a state employee, Dorothy continued to serve as a resource for others interested in African American history, but also found immense joy in volunteering with the local Meals on Wheels initiative.

# Cemetery Details

## Greenlawn Memorial Gardens

3920 Airline Blvd  
Chesapeake, VA

# Previous Events

## Graveside Service

OCT 9. 3:30 PM (ET)

Greenlawn Memorial Gardens  
3920 Airline Blvd  
Chesapeake, VA

# Tribute Wall

GF

“ I am sorry to hear about your passing. I finally was able to remember your name. I am the Daughter of June Browne and the Granddaughter of James (Jim) Spruill. I see some of the names from my childhood such as the Littlejohns. I purchased the book and hopefully it will give me enough information to connect again. It is a great loss for me not being able to meet you. I know one day I will. Thank you for your creating this book. Sincerely Gina R Browne-Funches of Las Vegas, Nevada.



Gina Funches - April 14, 2025 at 10:40 PM

DA

“ I met this wonderful and gifted Servant to Humanity at a gathering of the Pheonix Historical Society(Edgecombe County History)approximately 20 years ago. (2004)We didn't have time for condolences and friendly chit-chat owing to our mutual interest in a resource to further our knowledge and understanding of history and the role of the African American in it.The gathering took place in Tarboro and the area was still suffering from the effects of Hurricane Floyd.Dorothy was interested very much in the recovery and the well being of the local population.I am of the Muslim faith and had concerns about the total percent of enslaved Muslims during the Atlantic Passage.She accomodated my concerns and shared her knowledge with me in exchange for a car ride to the Princeville area which bore extensive flood damage.She exited my car and went on her way assuring me that she was going to be okay.May Allah(GOD)grant her peace in the Graves till the Day of Standing Forth.Amen  
David Abdus-Salaam

David Abdus-Salaam - May 28, 2024 at 10:20 AM



“ It was a hot summer day in the early 1980s in North Carolina when I persuaded my older brother to drive me up to VA to talk with this woman named Dorothy Redford who had written this book about a slavery plantation on the cusp of being recognized beyond this country's boundaries. We spent hours (my own biographical history being written at the time) with our notes spreading around us on her living room floor, laughing, sharing ideas, sharing notes. It was getting dark, so we had to leave, but we never left each other's mind. I attended the Summerset reunions even though my slave ancestors did not originate there I discovered that their history in the Piedmont area of Granville, Person, and Wake counties was not that different. I'm much older than Dot was but our minds met as equals. She will always be remembered. Barnetta McGhee White

Barnetta White - January 14, 2024 at 02:08 PM

SH

“ Dorothy Redford's work at Somerset, both her research and her re-interpretations of the site inspired me as a young graduate student back in the 1980s. I have taught Somerset Homecoming to generations of public history students. One of my greatest regrets is never having gotten to Somerset to meet her in person. Wishing comfort to all who loved her, and may her memory always be a blessing.

Sharon Ann Holt - October 13, 2023 at 03:09 PM

DG

“ I'm a friend of "Dot" from her days in Portsmouth and later North Carolina. She and Deborah were friends with my two children and me. We shared a lot of good times and conversations over the years.

*My condolences to her family and especially Deborah during this time.*

*Dorothy Gourdine  
Gastonia, NC*

Dorothy Gourdine - October 08, 2023 at 12:28 PM

TS

“ Dot was one of the warmest people I've known. She smiled and laughed easily. When she got going on an idea or a project, she pursued it with great intensity. The slave hospital at Somerset was a crowning achievement of which she was justly proud. A lovely person!

*Todd Savitt  
Greenville, NC*

Todd Savitt - October 08, 2023 at 11:41 AM



“ Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum was purchased for the family of Dorothy Spruill Redford.



October 08, 2023 at 03:09 AM

JW

“ Dot Redford utterly transformed Somerset from a site that focused on its white owners to a site that named and centered on the enslaved majority who worked and lived there. For all who came--descendants, for reunions, readers of her books, generations of students and visitors--she made Somerset a place that vivified the Black experience and that welcomed all. She was a joy to know.

Sydney Nathans  
Denver, Colorado

via James Wrenn, Tarboro, NC

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**James Wrenn** - October 06, 2023 at 12:06 PM

LT

“ Line Sisters of Delta Sigma Theta purchased the Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum for the family of Dorothy Spruill Redford.



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**Line Sisters of Delta Sigma Theta** - October 05, 2023 at 09:11 PM

LT

“ Line Sisters of Delta Sigma Theta planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Dorothy Spruill Redford.

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**Line Sisters of Delta Sigma Theta** - October 05, 2023 at 09:11 PM