



Photograph courtesy of Frank White Photography.

Friends of Geer Cemetery worked alongside Keep Durham Beautiful volunteers to beautify the Geer Cemetery entrance monument with new flowers donated by Ron Bartholomew of Durham Marble Works. The back of the monument, donated in 2008 by Durham Marble Works, is inscribed with a compelling statement for visitors to the historic site.

Geer Cemetery emerges as a historic cemetery

BY JESSICA T. EUSTICE
THE FRIENDS OF GEER CEMETERY

Deep appreciation goes to the volunteers of Crossfit Renowned and Keep Durham Beautiful Inc. for their recent work in clearing branches, vines, and trash out of historic Geer Cemetery on June 6.

Gradually, with the help of organizations and volunteers such as these, Geer Cemetery is emerging as a respectful, serene final resting place for more than 1,500 people buried in Durham's historic African American cemetery. From 1876 and until 1924 this was the only city cemetery for African-Americans in Durham.

A brief review of Geer Cemetery's emergence as a recognized historic site in Durham seems apropos, in



City Council member, Eddie Davis (center), explains the history and importance of Geer Cemetery to volunteers from Keep Durham Beautiful and CrossFit Renowned during their massive cleanup effort held in June.

SEE CEMETERY/PAGE 2

CEMETERY

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

slight of these recent efforts, and the planned celebration in December, of the 150th year since North Carolina's ratification of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, outlawing slavery.

In 1985, local Durham County historian Jean Bradley Anderson, wrote to the "Durham Morning Herald" about Geer Cemetery. Anderson's letter made it clear that (in 1985) the Cemetery Committee of The Durham Preservation Society, chaired by Doris B. Tilley had tried and been unable to canvass this Cemetery, because of the "condition of the terrain." Geer Cemetery was seriously overgrown, and it contained many sunken graves, so walking in it was treacherous.

In 1989 City Council approved a motion to initially clear the overgrowth out of the cemetery.

Then, in 1990, the city, one of 16 U.S. cities selected to participate in a program called the Urban Corps Expansion Project, began making progress toward clearing the cemetery. In 1992, Durham Area Youth Corps Board co-chairmen Mayor Wib Gulley and N.C. Central University Chancellor Emeritus LeRoy Walker (former president of the U.S. Olympic Committee) working with the Durham Chamber of Commerce, the Historic Preservation Society, R. Kelly Bryant Jr., NCCU professor Alice Eley Jones and others, completed a clean-up and canvassing program in Geer Cemetery.

In 2003, "The Friends of Geer Cemetery" was revived, and

Carrie McNair and several very dedicated volunteers (many of whom were members of the Durham-Orange Genealogical Society) worked tirelessly, hour upon hour, to extract burials from the death records in the Vital Records office. Because of this dedication, The Friends of Geer now had a complete listing of hundreds of burials that have been recorded in the cemetery.

At that time, Allen Dew performed the tasks to get the extracted data onto a web site where it became readily available to anyone, for free, without having to travel to Durham themselves. Furthermore, Allen Dew created a "Friends of Geer" website, which is nowadays linked to the Duke Park Neighborhood website under "Resources:" <http://friendsofgeer.com>. There is also a link on the Friends of Geer Cemetery web site to that survey listing at: <http://cemeterycensus.com/nc/durh>.

By January 2004, since the cemetery had once again become heavily overgrown and was nearly invisible, the City of Durham approved another clean-up program. This program was carried out by TROSA. By cutting vines and clearing weeds, underbrush and fallen trees and branches, it revealed significant hidden headstones, such as the one for Mary Sparkman, "Faithful Servant" to B.N. Duke, and World-War I veteran, Stanford Anderson Morgan.

Since then, the city, in partnership with Friends of Geer Cemetery, Keep Durham Beautiful Inc., and other organizations, maintained the cemetery at intervals by removing litter, debris and dead trees, and suppressing weed

and vine growth. Maintenance has also been performed to keep known headstones visible. Ron Bartholomew of Durham Marble Works worked with other volunteers to design and erect a stone Geer Cemetery sign on Camden Avenue.

In 2015, City Councilman Eddie Davis contacted friends of Geer, as well as County Commissioner Fred Foster and Kevin Lilly of Durham General Services and Keep Durham Beautiful Inc. (KDB) to reconstitute The Friends of Geer Cemetery (FoGC). Eddie Davis had a vision for the FoGC — that it would partner with the city, county and KDB to organize an event at the cemetery in December 2015, to recognize the 150th anniversary of North Carolina's ratification of the 13th Amendment.

The Friends of Geer came together in this new iteration, including Davis, Fred Foster Jr., Lilly, Tania Dautlick, Erin Victor, Ron Bartholomew, Allen Dew, Deidre Barnes, Bill Anderson, Dorothy Farrington, Jessica Eustice, David Eustice and others, setting as a goal to clean up the cemetery for the Decemberevent, and to maintain it thereafter as a site where visitors could comfortably come to pay their respects.

And now, with this latest clean-up effort having been made by Crossfit Renowned and Keep Durham Beautiful volunteers, the observer can readily ascertain that this is a cemetery. Where one once saw dead trees and underbrush, one now sees a clearing in a stately woodland, where individual monuments stand as sacred reminders of the lives of many of Durham's African-American ancestors.

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Page A9

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Richard A. Bean | Publisher
Bob Ashley | Editor
Mark Donovan | Metro Editor

EDITORIAL

Laudable effort for cemetery

On Jan. 15, 1900, The Durham Sun published this observation cited in cemeterycensus.com:

"The colored burying grounds, or cemetery, just beyond Mr. F. C. Geer's, out on the Roxboro road, is in rather bad shape. Numbers of the graves have sunken in, and in some instances not a thing can be seen to even indicate exactly where some of the graves are located. There are traces of where fire has recently burned the grass and straw over a portion of the burying ground, and several of the pine boards at the head and foot of the graves were burned, destroying all mark to show where the graves were."

Throughout the succeeding century, things generally got worse for the first cemetery for African-Americans in Durham — indeed, from the first burial there in 1876 until 1924, the only cemetery where the city's black citizens could be buried.

Closed as overcrowded by the health department in 1939 (although the last burial is reported to have been in 1944), the cemetery fell into decades of neglect with no clear ownership and no provision for continued maintenance. Headstones collapsed or were vandalized, sunken graves were obscured by overgrowth, and at times it was difficult to even realize a cemetery with the remains of some 1,500 people was even there.

In recent years, the city and volunteer groups have at intervals cleaned and helped restore the cemetery.

Today, those efforts appear on the way to being even more routine, and the cemetery may be highlighted as part of an important anniversary.

As a couple of recent stories in our The Durham Herald section have noted, a volunteer effort led by Keep Durham Beautiful and the Friends of Geer Cemetery — with muscular help from the folks at the Crossfit Renowned fitness center — in early June moved felled trees, restored tilted and fallen headstones, collected litter and smoothed a gravel road through the cemetery.

"Gradually, with the help of organizations and volunteers such as these, Geer Cemetery is emerging as a respectful, serene final resting place..." Jessica T. Eustice, executive director of the Friends of Geer Cemetery, wrote Sunday.

Earlier this year, Eustice wrote, City Councilman Eddie Davis "had a vision" that the Friends group, KDBB, the city and the county would organize a December event "to recognize the 150th anniversary of North Carolina's ratification of the 13th Amendment."

We can't think of a more appropriate site for that commemoration, and salute efforts of so many to preserve and enhance a site so important to this community's heritage.



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