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Oak Hill Cemetery Neglected no more - Restoration project making difference at city historic site



Chester Willis walks through Oak Hill Cemetery. He is a volunteer and is doing repair work on the grave stones. (Ron Campbell / Johnson City Press)

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After years of neglect, downtown Johnson City's historic Oak Hill Cemetery is getting a facelift.

Burial place of founder Henry Johnson and other notable figures from the city's 136-year history, the cemetery has fallen victim to neglect and vandalism in recent years and descendants of its more than 2,700 internees hope to set things right.

Members of the newly organized Oak Hill Cemetery Friends and



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Volunteers brought attention to conditions at the cemetery in February. They sent out a mailing requesting the help of about 100 known descendants of those buried there who previously contributed to its maintenance through the Oak Hill Cemetery Association, another victim of passing time and the advancing age of its administrators.

Organizer Barbara Sanders Thomas said Friday that thanks to the Internet, responses to the group's mailing have come from descendants all across the country. And even more significantly, a number of local groups have taken up the cause.

Since February, volunteers and city public works crews have ground out stumps and cut and removed wild trees and shrubs that had obliterated entire sections of graves, uprooted markers and provided a canopy for at least one homeless camp discovered in the cemetery.

Work has begun to restore and reset about 300 headstones that were broken and overturned by vandals, including many dating back to the late 1800s.

The Mountain Home Neighborhood Association, the Cemetery Survey Team of Northeast Tennessee and several area churches have joined the effort. City police have increased patrols in the area. And, in the past few weeks alone, city crews have removed more than five truck loads of brush. A city crew was on the grounds Friday clearing a mound of dirt, roots and broken markers that for reasons unknown had been piled on another section of graves.

Thomas estimated as much as 75 percent of the needed cleanup work has already been completed and hopes are that the rest of the work can be achieved in a communitywide work day set for this weekend at the cemetery.

"It's looking great already and it's really going to look fantastic when we get that fence cleaned out," Thomas said.

Volunteers can join in the work beginning at 8 a.m. Saturday. They are asked to bring their work gloves, hand tools and "soft brushes" for headstone cleaning with them.

A large garbage container will be on site and trash bags will be available. Chores will include trash pickup, raking, sidewalk clearing, edging and fence-row cleaning.

Chester Willis, a volunteer with the Cemetery Survey Team of Northeast Tennessee, has been repairing and resetting Oak Hill's damaged, and in some cases buried grave markers for the past several months. He also will be on hand Saturday to lead volunteers in the delicate work of headstone restoration.

Descendants of those buried at Oak Hill and others interested who are unable to join in the work are invited to stop by and add their name to the mailing list for updates on progress and future activities at the cemetery.

Because the cemetery has experienced episodes of neglect periodically throughout its history, Thomas said discussions have included the creation of a nonprofit organization to perpetually maintain the grounds.

According to a history of Oak Hill Cemetery, available at the Web site www.johnsonspot.com, the cemetery is as old as Johnson City itself, established in 1870 by seven trustees who each gave one-half acre of land at what then was the edge of the town. The trustees donated the land on the sole condition that a plank fence be built around the property. They were apparently still waiting for the fence some 26 years later when in 1896 a group of city churches raised money for “a substantial fence” to replace the barbed wire around its perimeter and “to keep the weeds and briars down.”

In addition to Henry Johnson, Oak Hill’s internees include Johnson’s fellow city founder, Tipton Jobe; Col. LeRoy Reeves, designer of the Tennessee state flag; U.S. Congressman Sam R. Sells; Maj. Cy Lyle, publisher of the Johnson City Comet; and George W. Hardin, superintendent of the ET&WNC Railroad.

The cemetery is located between Lamont, Boone, Wilson and Whitney streets, one block off West Main Street. For more information about Oak Hill Cemetery Friends and Volunteers, call Doug Sizemore at 282-0920 or Natalie and Ben Bailey at 283-9356.

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