

Home
NEWS
Weather
Metro & Virginia
Breaking News
Lottery Results
VA/AP Wire
Police Beat
Transportation
Local News
Politics & Elections
General Assembly
Religion
Special Reports
Columnists
Nation/World
Sports
Business
Opinion
Obituaries
CLASSIFIED
Search All Ads
Jobs
Home/Apt.
Cars
Place an Ad
LIFESTYLE
Entertainment
Flair
Travel & Recreation
Food & Fitness
Health & Science
Education
Specialty Magazines
Games
SERVICES
Archives
Advertise with Us

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Decaying landmark Cemetery for Richmond's prominent blacks suffers

MICHAEL PAUL WILLIAMS
TIMES-DISPATCH COLUMNIST

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Evergreen Cemetery, intended as a burial ground for Richmond's black aristocracy, is the scene of a horror story.

Grave sites choked by weeds, shrouded by woods and carpeted with kudzu have left many of the deceased lost in perpetuity.

Peek inside the gaping hole in the Braxton mausoleum, and you can see a skull and human bones.

Tombstones lie toppled or broken. Abandoned tires, construction debris and other garbage defile the graves.

"It's just a heart-rending story, particularly when you think this was supposed to have been the answer to Hollywood Cemetery," said Selden Richardson, a Richmond historian and preservationist.

"This was supposed to signal parity -- that blacks had arrived in Richmond."

Instead, neglect has encased the deceased in surroundings as separate and unequal as any they may have experienced in life. Evergreen, established in 1891, is a stark counterpoint to the immaculate, granite-encrusted grounds of Hollywood Cemetery, final home to two U.S. presidents, Jefferson Davis and a host of prominent white Richmonders.



Michael's column appears Mon. and Fri. Contact him at (804)649-6815 or mwilliams@timesdispatch.com



John Murden, a Church Hill resident and history teacher, looks at the well-maintained grave site of Maggie L. Walker and her family at Evergreen Cemetery.

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JOE MAHONEY/TIMES-DISPATCH

At Evergreen, the plots of such luminaries as bank founder Maggie L. Walker and newspaper editor John Mitchell Jr. are maintained. But discounting a new section, much of the cemetery is unkempt, despite occasional community efforts to clean it up.

"It's a place unlike any other I know of in Richmond," said Richardson, author of "Built by Blacks," a book about the city's black architecture and neighborhoods. "I don't know

of any other place so filled with decay and dread and desolation as that cemetery."

John Murden, a Church Hill resident and teacher at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School, visited the cemetery after a recent talk by Richardson and e-mailed The Times-Dispatch to describe Evergreen as "a tragedy and a travesty."

During a subsequent visit, Murden, who attended college in New Orleans, said the cemetery's condition hit his gut like Hurricane Katrina.

"It's another thing that could be a jewel of Richmond," he said of the cemetery. "It could be very, very special, and it's just been let go.

"History is important to me. I mean, I'm a history teacher. . . . Richmond's black history is being lost."

In "Here I Lay My Burdens Down," a history of Richmond's black cemeteries, Veronica A. Davis wrote that the Evergreen Cemetery Association made no allowances for perpetual care in its charter. In 1970, the association sold its more than 5,000 plots to Metropolitan Memorial Services, which soon went bankrupt. A group of black funeral-home directors bought the site at auction, but the decline continued before they sold it.

The majority owner of the cemetery, Isaiah Entzminger of UK Corp., said last night that Evergreen was a bad investment -- "I must have had a hole in my head to do that" -- and it's the responsibility of families to maintain it.

"I wish something could be done. I wish there was a contributor out there who said, 'Here's \$5 million -- clean it up and maintain it.'"

He said graves are maintained for families who pay a fee. But he said he's spent 25 to 30 years trying to contact families, with little success.

Davis, a Hampton resident who volunteers at Evergreen, backed Entzminger. "There's no finger-pointing at the owners. . . . The families need to step forward," she said.

But people familiar with the situation are fed up.

"To me, it should be hallowed grounds," said Richmond City Council Vice President Delores L. McQuinn. "And for a condition to be like this for this long, and no one giving it the attention it needs, I really think it's a shame.

She is exploring the city's enforcement powers for private cemeteries. "These are folks who should be resting in peace, and we should not have any exposure or bones, even if it was vandalized."

Unfortunately, Evergreen's situation is not unique. Barton Heights Cemetery in Richmond's North Side was in similar straits before a turnaround. Woodland Cemetery had to be cleared and cleaned to avoid a national embarrassment before Arthur Ashe's burial.

But Evergreen's situation is especially daunting and demands action.

"Everybody wants to have this history illuminated and glorified," Richardson said. "But the preservation and rescue of it, there seems to be this disconnect there."

Our history is dying at Evergreen with each submerged plot. Who cares enough to rescue it?

Contact staff writer Michael Paul Williams at mwilliams@timesdispatch.com or (804) 649-6815.

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