Neglected cemetery begins to generate lively interest

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Edian Markham, founding spirit of St. Joseph’s African Methodist Episcopal Church, rests close by a good Baptist, Margaret Ruffin Paulette, from whose home Sunday school arose Durham’s prestigious and powerful White Rock Church. A White Rock pastor, Augustus Shepard, is one of their neighbors. His son, James, founded what is now N.C. Central University.

Beside these three seminal citizens of early Durham lie at least 114, probably many more, of the city’s black elders. Above some of them stand gravestones, and above all of them sprawl English ivy, poison ivy, Virginia creeper, briers, tall grass and trees. Some of these trees are appropriately monumental, most are mere scrub. For a time, a sign marked the spot as Geer Cemetery.

Kelly Bryant (left) and Jesse Eustice stand near the old Geer Cemetery, now overgrown. They are leading an effort to get the historic black graveyard cleaned up.

“The sign was what let me know this was a cemetery,” said Jesse Eustice, who lives right across Colonial Street. “Before, we just thought it was a bunch of trees there.”

Now, the sign lies under growth itself, victim of a falling tree last winter.

For Eustice and other folks at the Duke Park neighborhood’s eastern end, the Geer Cemetery is, some times, a restfully sylvan spot, gold-leaved in fall, open woods in winter, bright with wisteria in spring. In summertime, though, it becomes a snaky tangle, shrouding its nature and its residents’ memory in a rank, green mass.

Who owns it?

Twelve years ago, the cemetery received its first tending since the 1930s. Afterward, interest flagged and the vines and saplings came back with vigor. Over the last few weeks, though, Eustice and retired N.C. Mutual executive R. Kelly Bryant have revived the cemetery’s cause.

“We’d like to see it cleaned again,” Bryant said on June 26 during an organizational meeting for a Friends of the Geer Cemetery group, “... and some sort of maintenance from now on.

“And also have the research done to see who’s really buried there.”

However, the first question to answer might be phrased: “Who’s in charge here?” One reason the cemetery has been so neglected is that no one knows who owns it.

Durham’s tax books list the cemetery’s address as 800 Colonial St., its size as 3.842 acres, its use as “community service/cemeteries,” its value as $100 and its owner as “Unknown.” Similarly, the owner’s address is “Unknown.”

Kelly Bryant said he has a 1908 deed by which his grandfather bought a plot in the cemetery. Several black individuals, prominent in Durham at the time, signed as the sellers. There is also a deed, filed at the Orange County Courthouse in Hillsbor-
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Added Bryant: “We can’t find any record of anybody beyond the first persons to whom the Geers deeded the property. And we are still trying to find out whether the city actually took it over.”

The city’s Landscape Division is contracting to keep the cemetery clear for another year, the Friends are proceeding with plans for a site survey and a permanent, brick sign to replace the battered piece of metal hanging from a post at one corner to identify “Geer Cemetery 1877-1944.” But just how old the cemetery is, when it was last used, and with whom or what its legal title resides, remain mysteries.

“It’s sort of in limbo,” said Guillermo Rodriguez, Landscape Division manager.

Clues

What is known is that the cemetery holds the remains of at least 1,519 individuals, their deaths dated from 1886 to 1939. Among them are Edian Markham, founder of St. Joseph’s AME Church; Margaret Faucette, founder of White Rock Baptist Church; and Augustus Shepard, White Rock pastor and father of N.C. Central University founder James Shepard.

Further, a deed of March 28, 1877 records the sale — for $50 — by Jesse B. Geer to Willis Moore, John Daniel and Nelson Mitchell, of a two-acre lot “to be used as a cemetery for the colored people.”

The deed refers to Moore, Daniel and Mitchell as “President,” “Secretary” and “ass. Secretary,” but does not say of what organization. From that point on, Bryant said, there are surviving deeds to plots in the cemetery, “signed by various people,” but if there is a paper trail identifying Moore, Daniel, Mitchell or “their heirs and assigns,” it has not turned up.

Durham County tax records list the tract as “Unknown Owner.”

“There’s no indication anything was deeded to anybody,” said Bryant, whose grandfather, Robert L. Pool, bought section No. 73 from the Trustees of the Colored Cemetery in 1908 and was buried there in 1913.

According to an oral account recorded in “Reclaiming Yesterday: The Geer Cemetery Project,” a model curriculum produced by a nonprofit called the Durham Service Corps, the first person buried there was an unnamed 11-year-old boy who worked on the Geer farm and died after being dragged some way by a runaway mule. Some time later, Geer was asked to allow another burial on his land, whereupon, “He said, ‘I’m gonna stake out four acres up here and ... let y’all have this for a graveyard.’”

On Jan. 15, 1900, the Durham Daily Sun reported that “the colored burying grounds ... just beyond Mr. F.C. Geer’s out on the Roxboro road, is in rather bad shape.” The newspaper stated that some graves had sunken in, “and in some instances not a thing can be seen to even indicate exactly where some of the graves are located.” Vandalism was also a problem.

While some burials had taken place there the previous month, the Sun wrote, “The burying ground certainly needs attention. ... It is rapidly going to ruin.”

According to the “Reclaiming Yesterday” account, by some in the 1930s the cemetery filled and the health department banned further interments.

Allen Dew said burials at tapered off after the mid-1940s when the city established Blackwood Cemetery for black residents. Bryant said he has information about burials at Geer Cemetery as late as 1944, though the latest confirmed to date is that of a Melinda E. Webb, who died in December 1938.

Size difference

The discrepancy in the cemetery’s size — between the four of the oral account and the 3.3-acre plot recorded on the 1877 deeds for the other — implies there was later property transactions. One of the outstanding those David Southern, a local historian and author on land records, Southern also pointed out