



Kelly Bryant, with yellow pad, talks to the assembled crowd about Geer Cemetery's history and significance in the community.

STAFF PHOTOS BY JOHN ROTTET

# Historic graveyard lives on through few

*To plan its future, residents look to cemetery's past*

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The filtered sun rays that fall through tall old trees at Geer Cemetery shed more light on what lies beneath the soft dirt than do most of the headstones in this historic burial ground.

More can be gathered about these few acres — sold in 1877 to three African-American men by the plantation-owning Geer family — from the many grave markers that have toppled over than by the few that remain readable.

Its secrets tease visitors — sinkholes shaped suspiciously like coffins whisper of the days when caskets were wooden and the poor, black dead were buried atop one another. Some headstones are nothing more than small slabs with initials — children, perhaps?

The grounds are covered in dying weeds (thanks to a recent chemical spray) and shade, which casts cooling shadows on the plot tucked into the eastern edge of Duke Park.

Durham's oldest black cemetery was neglected for decades after its closure due to overcrowding in the 1940s. The lineage of

land used by blacks was easily forgotten about during those pre-Civil Rights days. Save a city/community cleanup in the 1990s, it remained untouched.

In 2003, however, a group of people known as the Friends of Geer Cemetery formed to resurrect this historic relic and bring some accountability to the land. The Friends called upon the city to take responsibility. The land had been used, after all, as a public burial ground for decades.

The city agreed to its upkeep in 2003, but has never claimed the land as its own.

The problems in claiming ownership of this land form a complex and convoluted knot of liability and accountability — making sure the land does not legally belong to someone already, city statutes regarding cemetery maintenance, the county's responsibility for abandoned properties, historic preservation and the grand question of who would ul-

## PEOPLE OF NOTE IN GEER CEMETERY

**EDIAN D. MARKHAM** was the founder and first pastor of Bethel A.M.E. Church. In 1891, the church's name was changed to St. Joseph's A.M.E. Markham, born into slavery in eastern North Carolina, escaped to the North via the Underground Railroad. He returned to North Carolina — to Durham — in 1868. In August of 1869, he started the church with only six members.

**REV. AUGUSTUS SHEPARD** pastored White Rock Baptist Church from 1901 to 1911. Along with being very active in the state's black baptist community, he presided over a remodeling of White Rock and also founded the Oxford Colored Orphanage.

His son, Dr. James Shepard, founded the school that would later become N.C. Central University.

**MARGARET FAUCETTE** started White Rock Baptist Church in 1866 when she held prayer meetings in her home at the corner of Pettigrew and Husband streets. The meetings soon became full services.

SOURCES:

WHITE ROCK BAPTIST CHURCH: GATHERING GIFTS OF ITS HISTORY; WWW.WHITEROCKBAPTISTCHURCH.ORG.

