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REVEALING HEADSTONES OF HISTORY

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Abstract (Summary)

Gary D. Maynard, secretary of public safety and correctional services, said the department has increased the number of public service work projects it staffs with inmate crews. Notable names in Baltimore's African-American history, including Dr. Louise Young, the city's first black woman doctor, and Joseph Gans, the lightweight boxing champion, are among the more than 48,000 buried there.

Full Text (937 words)

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People passing Mount Auburn Cemetery in Westport will see an unusual sight these days: headstones.

For years, most of the graves at the historic cemetery - believed to be the oldest final resting place open to Baltimore's black residents - had disappeared behind a veil of honeysuckle vines, brambles and small trees.

But a crew of inmates is slowly clearing the overgrown brush with hand tools, the first step toward the eventual restoration of these neglected burial sites.

The congregation of Sharp Street United Methodist Church, which owns the cemetery, could never afford to pay a landscaper to do this work, said the Rev. Dellyne Hinton, senior pastor of the church. "It would be beyond anything we could possibly deal with," she said.

At a recent service, older members "thanked the men who are doing the work that they are unable to do, doing the work that their hands and knees won't let them do anymore," she said.

And the inmates, all in pre-release programs, recognize the impact of their hard work.

"It was always messed up," Devin Smith, 27, said of the cemetery that borders Cherry Hill, where he grew up. "I never thought it would be looking so good," he said during a water break while working at the site.

"I never knew it was a cemetery," said Jamaal Wescott, 26, who recalled driving past Mount Auburn in the past.

Gary D. Maynard, secretary of public safety and correctional services, said the department has increased the number of public service work projects it staffs with inmate crews. The projects include tree planting, playing-field construction and neighborhood cleanups planting trees, building playing fields and cleaning up neighborhoods.

These endeavors fit the "restorative justice" model, where inmates invest something in the community that they have harmed, he said. The projects reduce the costs faced by nonprofits and state and local governments and help inmates learn skills such as getting along with co-workers.

"We just look for opportunities to help cities and counties get some things done they couldn't get done otherwise," Maynard said.

For three months, the crew has cleared about eight of the cemetery's 34 acres. They cannot use machines to clear the dense overgrowth because of sunken ground and irregularly placed headstones.

Sharp Street purchased the cemetery in 1871, and it became known as "the City of the Dead for Colored People."

"This was the only place within the city lines we were allowed to be buried in," Hinton said.

Notable names in Baltimore's African-American history, including Dr. Louise Young, the city's first black woman doctor, and Joseph Gans, the lightweight boxing champion, are among the more than 48,000 buried there. The site was added to the

National Register of Historic Places in 2001.

The project allows the inmates to get close to that history. On Veterans Day, the crew marked the graves of soldiers with flags.

Maynard said the different agencies and organizations usually reimburse them for the cost of transporting the inmates and providing a corrections officer to oversee the group, but not always.

Not only have the inmates developed some important job skills - understanding what it's like to work on a team, for example - the experience also helps community residents overcome stereotypes about those with criminal records.

"They may for the first time see inmates as human beings, not just as people who are incarcerated," Maynard said.

Teams of volunteers and inmates have tried to tackle the problems at Mount Auburn in the past, but regrowth would often just erase their efforts. As a result, corrections officials, with the church and the Maryland Cooperative Extension, are exploring ways to control the foliage more permanently, including the use of herbicides.

"We want to work with the church so nobody needs to come back in five years," said Gary N. Hornbaker, assistant commissioner in the Division of Correction, who oversees pre-release programs.

Hinton agreed. "We've got to figure out what we can do to arrest the development of weeds in the area but to also respect the environment," she said. "The last thing we want to do is harm the environment or the people who are living in the community, but ... by not cleaning it up [it] is harming the environment as well."

During a recent visit, four crew members used saplings they cut down as levers to roll a pile of brush up a hill. They have worked from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., five days a week, since the day after Labor Day.

Marcus Lambert, 30, said it was hard cutting through thorns and other hazards. Everyone got poison ivy at one point.

"That's when you knew you were part of the crew," Wescott said.

However, Lambert felt proud when people in the neighborhood thanked them, some even bringing homemade meals or sodas on hot days, he said.

Lambert, who is scheduled to be released in March 2010, also pointed out that the experience prepares them for working an eight-hour shift.

He was also surprised when the crew was allowed to attend a Sharp Street church service this month thanking them for their hard work.

"They treated us like we were part of the congregation," Lambert said.

Credit: liz.kay@baltsun.com

[Illustration]

Photo(s); Caption: 1. Inmates work to restore Mount Auburn Cemetery in Westport, clearing out brambles and vines. 2. "I never knew it was a cemetery," says Jamaal Wescott, 26, one of the inmates working to clean up the cemetery.3. Devin Smith, 27, carries debris from the site. "I never thought it would be looking so good," he said of what is believed to be the city's oldest graveyard for African-Americans.

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