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Remaking final resting place to be worthy of a champion ; Grave of Baltimorean who boxed decades ago is restored, courtesy of modern-day admirers; [FINAL Edition]

NICOLE FULLER. *The Sun*. Baltimore, Md.: Oct 27, 2005. pg. 1.A

Abstract (Summary)

Like many prominent African-Americans of his generation, he was buried at Mount Auburn. Former Heavyweight Champion of the World Mike Tyson once made a visit to Gans' grave.

so on Monday afternoon, armed with shovels and a crane, Larry Cramblitt and Ralph Thomas, workers from C.M. Seubott Memorials Inc., descended upon Gans' plot. By 4 p.m. they had dismounted the gravestone, stripped away most of the old stone foundation and removed a bush and its roots that grew in the plot.

Photo(s); 1. Larry Cramblitt removes earth dug up to make way for pouring concrete that will stabilize the gravesite of boxing great [Joseph Gans] in Mount Auburn Cemetery. 2. C.M. Seubott Memorials Inc. is restoring the grave of Joseph Gans. Ralph Thomas shovels out dirt and stone after the removal of the headstone, which had been tilted and sinking. The Seubott team distributed leftover earth to fill some of the cemetery's low spots.; Credit: LLOYD FOX : SUN PHOTOGRAPHER

Full Text (874 words)

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The headstone is inscribed with just one word: Gans.

It's a bit of a head-scratcher to some, how a boxing great and native son of Baltimore, Joseph Gans, known in the ring as the "Old Master," ended up with such a brief send-off.

He was, after all, Baltimore's first worldwide boxing champion and the first native-born black American to win a worldwide title.

His nearly 6,000-pound granite marker once stood with an air of prestige among the many cracked and overturned gravestones at Mount Auburn Cemetery, believed to be the city's oldest cemetery for African-Americans. But just like most of the decrepit plots at Mount Auburn, it had fallen on hard times.

Until Monday, the stone was sinking into the ground, leaning on its left side. The gravesite was overgrown with weeds. And just a small bunch of fake flowers, a wreath and a Styrofoam heart festooned with red ribbon marked the spot where one of Baltimore's first sports heroes lay.

For a boxing champ of such stature, his final resting place was not grand.

That was much to the ire of Frank Gilbert, a longtime boxing aficionado and the president of the Veteran Boxers Association, International Ring 101 Inc. At its monthly meeting in September, Gilbert roused the membership to pay for a grave makeover.

"When it's done, it ought to look, like I say, worthy of a champion," said Gilbert, 71.

On Monday, work began to restore the gravesite to its past grandeur and to add some of the bells and whistles that were missing.

Gans spent at least four years as lightweight champion during the early 1900s. Some say he held the title for six years. Nevertheless, his style was revered. He delivered blows with laser-like accuracy. He bobbed and weaved, never moving more than a few inches. He won 120 fights, lost eight, and recorded nine draws and 85 knockouts, according to the International Boxing Hall of Fame.

A Sun article from 1960 read, "A popular saying at the turn of the century was that Baltimore was known to the world as the birthplace of the Star-Spangled Banner, the jurisdiction of Cardinal Gibbons and the home of Joe Gans."

He was born Joseph Gaines in 1874, but after a newspaper reporter misspelled his name in an article, he simply adopted the mistake. At just 5 feet 6 inches and 133 pounds, the former oyster shucker became the world's lightweight boxing champion in 1902 when he beat Frank Erne. He died on Aug. 10, 1910, after losing a bout with tuberculosis.

And like many prominent African-Americans of his generation, he was buried at Mount Auburn. Former Heavyweight Champion of the World Mike Tyson once made a visit to Gans' grave.

The cemetery was founded in 1871 on 33 acres of land purchased by what is now Sharp Street Memorial United Methodist Church.

For decades, it served as the final resting place for the city's black elite. Dr. Louse Young, Baltimore's first black woman doctor; Jerome B. Young, the first African-American promoted to sergeant during World War I; and Lillie Carroll Jackson, president of the city branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People from 1935 to 1970, are buried there.

But the church no longer had the money to maintain the cemetery, which has largely fallen into disrepair; the once-prestigious grounds turned into a wasteland of weeds and thigh-high grass. In the past, caskets and human bones have emerged from beneath the ground.

And so on Monday afternoon, armed with shovels and a crane, Larry Cramblitt and Ralph Thomas, workers from C.M. Seubott Memorials Inc., descended upon Gans' plot. By 4 p.m. they had dismounted the gravestone, stripped away most of the old stone foundation and removed a bush and its roots that grew in the plot.

And in an act of kindness, they shoveled the excess dirt into some of the holes in the cemetery's uneven landscape.

"Whenever we get leftover dirt, we'll fill in the holes," Cramblitt said. "If we don't do it, no one else will."

The work will include adding a concrete foundation and engraving on his tombstone, noting Gans' birthdate and the date of his death, his status as the world's lightweight champion and his induction into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1990. It is expected to be finished in two weeks.

The activity at Gans' plot caught the attention of Reginald McCracken, 41, who lives near the cemetery and recalls working there cutting grass as a young boy.

"I didn't know if they were trying to rob the place or what," McCracken said. "I lived here all my life and I never saw a big stone like that be moved. He's a pretty famous person there."

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[Illustration]

Photo(s); Caption: 1. Larry Cramblitt removes earth dug up to make way for pouring concrete that will stabilize the gravesite of boxing great Joseph Gans in Mount Auburn Cemetery. 2. C.M. Seubott Memorials Inc. is restoring the grave of Joseph Gans. Ralph Thomas shovels out dirt and stone after the removal of the headstone, which had been tilted and sinking. The Seubott team distributed leftover earth to fill some of the cemetery's low spots.; Credit: LLOYD FOX : SUN PHOTOGRAPHER

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Indexing (document details)

People:	Gans, Joseph, Gilbert, Frank, Cramblitt, Larry
Author(s):	NICOLE FULLER
Section:	TELEGRAPH
Publication title:	The Sun. Baltimore, Md.: Oct 27, 2005. pg. 1.A
Source type:	Newspaper
ISSN:	19308965
ProQuest document ID:	917238001
Text Word Count	874
Document URL:	http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=917238001&sid=1&Fmt=3&cli_entId=10562&RQT=309&VName=PQD

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