

**Cemetery**

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ments, a brick making company and several parking lots owned by R.J. Reynolds — the Odd Fellows of today is shielded by a rain forest-like band of trees and shrubs.

A closer view will reveal that the forest sprouts headstones. In fact, thousands of them are spread out over the immense cemetery; however, a number of them are shrouded in tree branches and trash, which has been illegally dumped on the property.

But help is on the way. A group of local men and women have vowed to restore Odd Fellows to its past glory.

"A lot of people that have family members buried there can't get in there to see them," said Henry Stepp, president of the Odd Fellows Cemetery Reclamation Project. "We want to make it possible for people to get in and pay homage to their loved ones."

Formed about two years ago, the Reclamation Project has been working with scarce resources to transform the eye sore into a gem.

The group says with Odd Fellows being the oldest black cemetery of its size in the city, it is well worth saving.

Some of the headstones show dates as early as 1897, and the cemetery is the final resting place for several notable blacks.

G.W. Hill, one of the founders of Winston Mutual Life, and the Rev. R.L. File — the founder of Mt. Zion Baptist and several other churches — are among those who rest in the cemetery.

"This cemetery is a historical monument to the city," Stepp said. "It's a place where prominent African Americans are buried."

But Stepp and the 30 or so other members of the group also have personal interests in the cemetery.

"My grandmother, my mother,

my aunt, my brother...are all buried here," Stepp said, pointing to a heap of branches that covers his family's plot. He added that one day he wants to join the rest of his family at Odd Fellows.

Stepp says he has been fortunate because many people have searched for family members in vain. It is especially difficult for those families who planted distinguishable flowers or trees on their loved ones' graves because they could not afford headstones, Stepp said.

The group plans to erect a memorial wall in the revitalized cemetery so that family members can add the names of those loved ones whose plots have been swallowed up by the hedges.

Alderman Nelson Malloy has also joined the Odd Fellows effort. The cemetery sits in his North ward and when families couldn't get into the cemetery one Easter, Malloy's phone started to ring.

"They wanted some type of access to the cemetery, especially on certain holidays," Malloy said.

The group asked RJR to allow access through one of its lots and the company quickly agreed. In the last few months the group, with the help of volunteers, has been able to clear the cemetery's main road.

The group is also in the process of becoming a nonprofit organization. The tax-exempt status will allow the group to solicit funds and apply for grants from several different sources, Malloy said.

"We not only want to reclaim the cemetery, we want people who still have deeds to plots to have the opportunity to still be buried there," Malloy said.

Ironically, it was Malloy who helped to save the cemetery that is associated with Odd Fellows' ultimate downfall. Malloy was instrumental last year in getting New Evergreen Cemetery expanded.

Malloy says he is confident that this group will also win its crusade to save Odd Fellows.

"It's going to take us some time," he said. "We are continuing to meet and continuing to keep this effort alive."

The Reclamation Project is constantly looking for families who have relatives buried in the cemetery so that they can help to identify some of the plots and possibly join in the effort.

Mel White, the director of African American programs at Old Salem, has researched Odd Fellows and a other historic black cemeteries. He compiled a list of names of people buried at Odd Fellows in hopes of sparking public interest in the cemetery. The Reclamation Project still uses the list.

"A good dozen cemeteries went into disuse around the time that New Evergreen went up," White said.

Among those were Brushy Fork Cemetery near Fifth Street and the Happy Hill cemetery.

White said when he first visited Odd Fellows, he was not only surprised by vast number of headstones on the 8-acre tract, but also by the fairly good condition many of them were in.

"Odd Fellows and Brushy Fork are in the best condition (among the old cemeteries), White said. "The trees have protected the stones over the years."

While White said that he did not know of any unused cemeteries in the city that have been revitalized, he said it has been done



Photo by Damon Ford

Woods and vines cover headstones at Odd Fellows Cemetery. Thousands of graves are hidden by dense cover at the 8-acre cemetery.

elsewhere.

"I know of any number that have been reclaimed in the South in the past few years," he said.

James Clyburn remembers going to Odd Fellows as a young man to help tidy up the family plot. His father, grandmother and grandfather are among those who are buried there.

Clyburn — who is the first vice-president of the Reclamation Pro-

ject — says that when he was a youngster tending the plot, he didn't realize what an important place Odd Fellows was. But he has grown up.

"It's really a historical place for the black community and we don't have many places that we can call our own in this city," he said.

Clyburn talks about the cemetery's future with great excitement. Although he knows the road ahead will be a long and some-

times tedious, Clyburn says the group is leaving little room for doubts.

"We want to see the cemetery brought back the way it should be," he said. "I have no doubts. We will accomplish and finish what we have started."

The Odd Fellows Cemetery Reclamation Project meets every third Tuesday at 6 p.m. in Mt. Zion Baptist Church's File-Goodwin Center.



The Rev. R.L. File is one of many prominent blacks buried at Odd Fellows. File founded Mt. Zion Baptist Church and several other churches throughout the south.

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