

Maryland Independent

## Hidden Nanjemoy gravesite to receive documentation, recognition

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The Rev. Ruby Brown-Thomas grew up visiting her Aunt Dorothy, affectionately known as Aunt Tump, and Uncle Anthony at their Nanjemoy farmhouse hearing stories about what was buried up the hill from their home. At the time, she thought they were stories created by her aunt and uncle to keep her and her siblings from getting into trouble. Today, the wooded space is

dotted with brightly colored flags marking dozens of deep depressions in the ground — unknown African-American graves in a cemetery that had never been officially documented since its beginnings dating back to before the Civil War.

“I remember as a little girl my Aunt Tump would tell us, ‘there are people buried up there in the woods,’ and as I got older I would walk through the woods and I could see the sunken graves,” Brown-Thomas said. “A lot of people who knew about the cemetery have died because they started burying people over 100 years ago, so now there’s only a handful of people that know there was a cemetery there but we had no idea until now that it served as a community cemetery.”

On Oct. 28, a large work effort brought together dozens of volunteers and experts from local and state agencies, including archeologists, genealogists, architects, historians and more, to locate graves and identify some of the people in the unidentified plots within the hidden cemetery along Poseytown Road.

“Sites like this are not always recognized when communities develop and are lost oftentimes, but it is an important part of local history and important to the state as well that’s reflected in the interest of this project,” said Cathy Thompson, community planning program manager for the county, who began discussing the project’s prospects with Brown-Thomas in 2015. “To the untrained eye you would not recognize it as a burial ground ... thanks to the documentation and the mapping and cleanup efforts that it will now be officially recognized moving forward.”

The work day began with several projects, including documenting and mapping the Mt. Hope Missionary Baptist Church Cemetery, which also had many unidentified graves, as part of its 150th church anniversary. The church is the oldest African-American Baptist church in the county and began one of the first African-American schools in the region.

“I think it’s wonderful,” the Rev. Francis J. Ford, pastor at Mt. Hope Missionary Baptist Church, said of the work day. “It’s bringing history together and helping us understand our ancestors and what happened during those times. I’m grateful to those who put the history together, and I think it was something that we needed to look into and I’m very appreciative.”



It is believed the farmhouse was used as the original place of worship for the founders of Mt. Hope Baptist before the current church was built about a mile away on Gilroy Road in 1867. The cemetery, now named Carroll Cemetery, is located just behind the farmhouse, still on Carroll

property owned by Doris Barber. The graves in the cemetery appear to date back to the early 1800s.

More than 70 graves have been marked at the Carroll Cemetery and there are believed to be many more. So far, 30 people have been identified to be buried there.

Tina Simmons, a genealogist and board member of the Coalition to Protect Maryland Burial Sites, researched the identities of those believed to be buried at the Carroll Cemetery. Several individuals with the surnames Carroll, Gutrick, Posey and Thomas were found to be at the site, in addition to those with the last names of Blair, Dorsey, Prince, Queen, Smith and Swann.

It is also believed that a relative of Matthew Alexander Henson, a Nanjemoy native, may be among those laid to rest at the historic cemetery, according to Brown-Thomas. Henson is recognized as the first African-American Arctic explorer, co-discoverer of the North Pole and the first person in recorded history to set foot there.

More than 500 burials were mapped at the Mt. Hope Church Cemetery, of which 295 are marked burials by David D. Mills, an architect engineer and treasurer for the Maryland Coalition to Protect Maryland Burial Sites. Mills also built and donated a sign officially marking the Mt. Hope Church Cemetery.

“This is a really special [project],” Esther Doyle Read, Charles County archeologist, said of the site. “This church was formed after slavery ended. This is a success story about a congregation that started after slavery and the cemetery is symbolic of all the people in this congregation who worked together to achieve some really notable and interesting things. These were landowners, people who were active in African-American education, so it’s a success story and very symbolic for the people who lived in the area about what a church family can do when they work together.”

“This is a locally significant site, meaning it’s important to this neighborhood, community and to the story of the African-American experience in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War and what they built for themselves,” Naomi Doddington, the architect team leader for the Carroll farmhouse with the Association for Preservation Technology, Washington, D.C., Chapter. “This wasn’t given to them. They built this for themselves and established a congregation that is still active today and that’s really saying something.”

Doddington and her team recorded the dimensions of the Carroll farmhouse and will officially have it designated as a historic site.

With the help of Preservation Maryland, the day became a group effort of uncovering and documenting history. Preservation Maryland is a statewide organization dedicated to promote and protect historic places. Building on a year-long Six-to-Fix partnership with the Coalition to Protect Maryland Burial Sites, the goal of the workday was to work with the congregation to begin a comprehensive assessment of the church property and early family property that includes several structures and burials sites within the historic cultural landscape, according to Megan Baco, director of communications for Preservation Maryland.

Doddington said her drawings and documentation of the Carroll farmhouse, which was originally a log cabin and is now in disrepair, will survive long after the house is gone.

“I find the story of our minority communities to be very important. I am Hispanic and I want people to share the stories that have gotten glossed over and we’re making an effort to get more of the stories captured before they disappear forever,” Doddington said.

“The original founders of the church lived in this house, updated this house and the house had this family cemetery there and when the congregation grew they built the church. So it was important to take a look at it not just as a cemetery but the historical landscape through Poseytown, this African-American settlement and community,” Baco said of the project.

The work day culminated with recording oral stories of church members, families who drove hundreds of miles to participate in the event and community members who shared their stories. Moving forward, Brown-Thomas continues to work with county, state and preservation officials to compile the information gathered. Her goal is to see the Carroll Cemetery and the farmhouse officially recognized and the oral stories documented from that day so the area’s rich history can be recorded for all to see and read.

Though Brown-Thomas’s connections to the project run deep — she and her brother, Ron Brown, are current owners of the Carroll farmhouse; she is a member of Mt. Hope Church; and her great-grandfather, Sgt. Charles Henry Brown, who fought in the Civil War, was the first person buried at the Mt. Hope cemetery — she aims to go beyond connecting Mt. Hope’s story to the history of Charles County.

“I have always understood the importance of preserving history and I knew that the history of the African-American culture was rooted deep in the western side of the county and once I began to realize Mt. Hope Church was central in the religious movement and in the progress of the African-American community and its culture, it pulled out all my curiosity and I knew I had to do something,” Brown-Thomas said.

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