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Restoring the Past For Tomorrow's Future

by Devin Crum

Several Jacksonville-area churches are joining forces across denominations to rehabilitate the nearby historic cemetery at Mt. Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church. The effort to restore the graveyard — that includes colored soldiers from the Civil War, Buffalo soldiers and veterans from World Wars I and II — will not only honor the area's past but also be a victory for race relations and historic preservation alike in the greater community, say volunteer coordinators.

The participating churches, ranging from Presbyterian to Episcopal to Methodist and more, are celebrating the project's kickoff on April 30, beginning at 1:30 p.m., at Mt. Zion AME, located at 12728 Manor Road in Glen Arm. Everyone is welcomed; bring your own chair.

Religious leaders, keynote speakers, gospel musicians, exhibitors, even elected representatives are taking part in the official start of the three-year project that will reclaim the sacred grounds but also rediscover lost graves previously marked with simple wooden crosses that have long ago disappeared.

"We want to recognize those who came before with the help of our friends today," said Kathryn Holcombe, a Mt. Zion congregant and chairperson of the committee spearheading the program, Holcombe has more than 30 family members buried in the graveyard next to the simple clapboard church where services began about 1820 in a log structure built by its members. The first practitioners were slaves or manumitted slaves from the nearby Hampton, Baldwin and even Perry Hall plantations.

Better relations

The Mt. Zion AME cemetery rehabilitation project also is a way for the greater Jacksonville community to recognize the contributions of their African American neighbors in building the foundations of the rural village while fostering better relations now and in the future.

"Showing our respect for the individuals who are buried in the cemetery is just a way to extend that friendship and care over the centuries and into tomorrow," said Rita Ennis, a member of Chestnut Grove Presbyterian Church (CGP) who has taken a principle role in organizing the project.

The first phase of the three-year-long restoration project will consist of cleaning, straightening and repairing the historic grave markers within the roughly 200-year-old cemetery, according to Ennis.

Last fall, a community-wide headstone cleaning seminar was held with a “well-educated preservationist” who explained the methodologies of cleaning and preserving historic grave markers.

“That didn’t help us straighten or repair but we can clean what we have,” she said. “And we’ve done some of that already.”

Wooden crosses

The next goal of the project is to locate any unmarked graves in the necropolis using ground-penetrating radar (GPR) in coordination with Mt. Zion’s cemetery records and the memories of church members to hopefully identify those interred.

“This cemetery has been around since sometime in the 1820s,” Ennis said. “And the oral tradition of [Mt. Zion AME] is that there are at least 50 — and we think it could be even over 100 — unmarked graves there.”

Some of Mt. Zion’s oldest living members, now in their 90s, say they remember a time when there were wooden crosses in the middle of the graveyard marking those laid to rest there.

“These crosses have all rotted and are gone now,” Ennis said of the original markers. She added that they hope to install numbered markers on each of the graves they are able to locate.

Additionally, members of the restoration group say they plan on planting some landscaping within the funerary grounds for increased safety and accessibility plus install some plantings to mark the cemetery’s boundaries. They also intend to install a list of names and location marker on the property.

Roadside market

In the longer term, the project’s organizers say they hope to publish a booklet to raise community awareness of those buried in the cemetery using information garnered through historical research, Ennis said.

And someday, soon they hope, a historical roadside marker will let passing motorists know about the historical significance of the cemetery and the area’s African American community.

And finally, “if we can get this far,” added Ennis, the project aims to establish a community organization that will care for the ongoing maintenance of the cemetery, “so that it won’t be a financial burden on the [Mt. Zion] church and so the community will see it as a resource and hallowed ground for the whole community.”

The anticipated total cost of the project could top $200,000. However, the group’s members are applying for an African American history and culture state grant which could cover up to half of those costs.

“The remaining $100,000 would have to come from our neighborhood,” she said. “I think that’s realistic.”

‘An answered prayer’

Ennis said the genesis of the cemetery restoration project came from conversations on race that CGP, a predominantly white congregation, held in the wake of George Floyd’s death while in the custody of Minneapolis police two years ago and the unrest that followed. During the talks, Ennis asked her fellow congregants what CGP should do differently and what they, as individuals, would do with this evolving sensitivity about race.

Two members mentioned the cemetery at Mt. Zion AME, a small historically black church, was in “terrible” shape and that the leaders of that church wanted to do something about it but couldn’t afford to make the desired improvements.

Ennis then reached out to Mt. Zion’s pastor who called the restoration project “an answered prayer.” Recently, a massive tree limb had fallen and broken several headstones. The church did not have the resources to have the limb removed or fix the headstones.

CGP members visited Mt. Zion’s cemetery, quickly raised the money and had the fallen tree limb cut up and hauled away.

“But in the process, several of us were asking, ‘Well now, what about the headstones that are broken? And look at the rest of the cemetery. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could do something more?’” Ennis explained.

Within a few months, a committee consisting of volunteers from several of the area’s churches was formed with the expressed goal of rehabilitating the cemetery.

“In the last year and a half since, we’ve been educating and informing ourselves on cemetery regulations and how to go about doing the various things that the cemetery needs,” she said, as well as getting to know each other and looking for sources of funding.

‘Best practices’

But what started as an “answered prayer” to remove a tree limb, has become much more.

This is not just a collaboration between CGP and Mt. Zion. A group of eight churches in the Jacksonville-Long Green Valley area, known as the Four Corners Ministerium which works to bring churches together regardless of denomination, also is involved.

The cemetery’s restoration is important to all these churches, she said, because most of the Ministerium’s member churches have been established since at least since the Civil War. So they can share what is learned from the Mt. Zion project with other neighboring churches that also have graveyards in need of some attention.

“Historic church cemeteries have lots of common problems and cleaning and repairing headstones is one of them,” said Ennis, noting that of those who attended the fall headstone cleaning workshop, about half of them had no connection with Mt. Zion AME.

“We hope there will be a nice, ongoing sharing of knowledge, best practices and experiences amongst a number of those churches throughout northern Baltimore County and parts of Harford County.”

A common goal

Rev. Sereta Collington, the relatively new pastor of the Mt. Zion church for the past year and a member of the restoration project committee, agreed that what is learned at Mt. Zion can benefit others and not just to fix up graveyards.

“After the restoration [at Mt. Zion],” she said, “I believe it will continue to be a collaboration where we can bring everyone together, not just because we are an African American church but because [the other churches] also have cemeteries that they can learn how to keep and maintain.”

The obvious benefit to Mt. Zion, according to Collington, is restoring the history of slaves, former slaves and their descendants buried in the cemetery, some of whom may be important historical figures for the area. Additionally, some of the church’s current parishioners have relatives or ancestors buried there.

“There are people here who have great-grandparents buried there,” said Collington, though they are not necessarily part of the historical project.

Beyond that, Collington said, the project is a way for all the churches involved, as well as the broader community, to come together and bridge the racial divide while working toward a common goal.

“So just being an African American church here, this is also something we are working on to create unity between all of our congregations regardless of denomination,” she said. “The project is helping the community to work together on one project for removing the racial border.”

For more information about the Mt. Zion AME Church Cemetery Rehabilitation, visit the Facebook page or email mtzioncemeteryrehabilitation@gmail.com.
To participate in the upcoming work days involving straightening and cleaning headstones or various landscaping projects, send an email to mtzionamecemeteryrehabilitation@gmail.com.
To donate, please mail checks, made payable to Greater Mt. Zion Community Organization, to 12728 Manor Road, Glen Arm MD 21057. All donations are tax deductible.