

School's cemetery project combines education, preservation

More than just a history class

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By TAWNELL D. HOBBS / The Dallas Morning News

To passers-by, the cemetery off Hatcher Street in South Dallas is little more than a weed-choked lot, filled with crumbling headstones and occupied at night by the homeless who sleep there.

But the staff at Lincoln High School saw it as a gem.

To them, L. Butler Nelson Memorial Park, sandwiched between Lincoln and a cluster of abandoned apartments, had endless educational possibilities. It held lessons in history, math, journalism, the environment, physical education and computer science.

So the school has woven the forgotten 12-acre plot into its curriculum, with dual goals of teaching students and looking after history.



JUAN GARCIA / DMN
Lincoln High School students John Edmund and Nicole Burnley inspect a tombstone at L. Butler Nelson Memorial Park. The 12-acre site, which once served Dallas' black residents, has become an outdoor classroom for the school.

"It's like finding a diamond in the rough," said teacher Shirley Pickton, a leader of the Silent Souls Cemetery Project. "If we polish it up, we'll have living history. This project becomes the extended classroom."

Not much has been written about the cemetery, once a burial place for black residents, including former slaves and their descendants. A newspaper article from 1948 called it a "largely untended, unkempt Negro cemetery." One particular portion of the cemetery, a pet burial ground used by whites, has received more ink.

The pet cemetery, cordoned off by bushes in a corner, isn't in great shape. But some of the pet graves, including one for "Our Beloved Jack" that's enclosed in a 3-foot iron fence, are more elaborate than some of those for humans.

A Boy Scouts group has documented half of the graves – several hundred, said Frances James, a Dallas historian known as "The Cemetery Lady." Many people buried there were born in the mid- to late-1800s. The oldest documented burial is from 1892, Mrs. James said.

It's not certain when the cemetery had its last burial. Many people buried there died in the early to mid-1900s. Mrs. James said the cemetery went through several owners and was in bad shape before it became city-owned.

History has left plenty of work to be done by the students at Lincoln.

The cemetery lesson plan incorporates most subject areas, from history to math.

It includes having student photographers document each grave marker and journalism students interview members of the community. Math classes will graph plots. History classes will research graves. Environmental classes will determine the age of trees. Physical education classes will help clean the grounds. Computer classes will create an interactive Web site.

Students in physics classes will determine how to put displaced headstones where they belong. And business classes will type and verify all the information.

"It's going to be a pretty lengthy project," said Earl Jones, principal of the 1,106-student school.

HOW TO HELP
Anyone with photos or information about the cemetery may call Lincoln High School teachers Shirley Pickton or Jerry Chambers at 972-925-7600, or e-mail spickton010@dallasisd.org .

Mrs. James said Lincoln has a big task ahead just determining who is buried there. Some depressions in the ground, about the size of caskets, mark graves with missing headstones.

Pieces of broken markers are embedded in a trail that runs through the cemetery. In one spot, a large piece of a marker is clearly visible. He was in the military, with a rank of private.

Mrs. James said she has told people to watch where they step. "They were just taking a shortcut, stepping on graves," she said.

A lightly graveled road runs the length of the graveyard but eventually gives way to overgrown grass. There's no evidence that the cemetery receives visitors. Instead of flowers, there are ant mounds.

Headstones tell a story of neglect: Some are uprooted. Some are sunken. Others are missing. Letisha Cotton's tombstone, one of the tallest at about 6 feet, can barely be seen through a thicket of trees. It reads: "Gone But Not Forgotten."

Mrs. Pickton and several students walked around the site last week. The students' questions ranged from "Was this a slave?" to "Where are their families?" Some even knelt down to brush dirt from headstones, curious to see who's buried there.

Student Brittney Boyd, 17, doubted much of the damage to the cemetery was done by weather or settling earth.

"I've seen people vandalize this cemetery," she said. "You don't think they will, but they do."

The students hovered around the grave of Mrs. P.L. Collins, a Baptist church member for 40 years. She died in 1916. The teenagers wondered what her life was like. Mrs. Pickton urged them to do some research and find out.

"Everybody check your churches," she said. "Go to the elders and see if there's any stories."

Marva Sweat, whose mother lives in the area, walked by the cemetery. She was curious what Mrs. Pickton and her students were up to.

"You about to do something with this cemetery?" she asked. "It's in bad shape; bad people sleep in the graveyard."