



Nature, neglect take toll on black settlers' cemetery in Carrollton

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Not much is left to mark the final resting spots of Carrollton's earliest black settlers. But they left their mark on the city, says resident Willie Rainwater.

"They set the foundation for us to be where we're at now. ... They built Carrollton," he said. "Black people are the ones that laid all the bricks. The cement was poured by black people."

Lest they be forgotten, every year Mr. Rainwater and a group of volunteers cut weeds and clean up Carrollton Community Cemetery, also known as Carrollton Black Cemetery.

But Mother Nature thwarted them this year. An April storm that ripped down trees and fences across town left the historic cemetery, already overgrown with grass and weeds, a shambles.

"There are some tops of the trees that have been blown off, and they're suspended above the property by other limbs," said Brian Passwaters, the city's community services manager. "Other limbs are down on the ground. It creates a harborage for rodents, for coyotes and other animals we have in the area. ... It could be a danger out there."

The cemetery sits on a roughly 22-acre undeveloped tract owned by a bank in Houston. But the city has been unable to get the bank to mow it. Several times, the city has had crews mow a 50-foot-wide strip around the property, placing a lien on the land in hopes of someday recovering its costs.

The cemetery, however, sits in a dell in the interior of the tract. And because regulations don't require mowing there, the city has largely left it alone.

About the only maintenance the cemetery has received has come from volunteers with Christ Community Connection, said Mr. Rainwater, whose great-grandfather Field Davis is buried there. The group usually goes out around Juneteenth.

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A worker cleared trees and branches Thursday at Carrollton Black Cemetery. Much of the damage occurred during an April storm, but the cemetery was already overgrown with grass and weeds.

But because of the storm damage, Mr. Rainwater notified city officials, and representatives from the parks and code enforcement departments visited. The city sent a crew to clear the limbs Thursday.

The cemetery was established in the late 1800s, and the last burial is believed to have taken place in 1960. Many buried there are believed to have come to the area as slaves.

The site is in the floodplain of the Elm Fork of the Trinity River, according to the Dallas County Historical Commission, and floodwaters have washed away all but two of the tombstones, leaving only one of those intact.

In the late 1970s, a developer expressed interest in buying the land that includes the cemetery and bulldozing the site. But a 1980 lawsuit halted that plan, bringing state recognition for the cemetery and prohibiting construction that would disrupt the graves.

In the late 1990s, volunteers installed uninscribed white wooden crosses to mark the graves that could be found. And in 2002, a city historical marker was dedicated on the site.

Mr. Rainwater hopes the city will help drum up community support for continuing upkeep.

The cemetery is special to him, not only because his ancestors are buried there but also because it holds the remains of others who helped make Carrollton a community.

"It should mean a whole lot to the whites and to everyone else, because they built the foundation of all of it," Mr. Rainwater said. "We really can't afford to lose the history."