SOUL SEARCHING

USAFA GRAD HELPS RESTORE HISTORIC AFRICAN AMERICAN CEMETERY

By Jeff Holmquist

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Out of the corner of his eye, Patrick Tisdale '79 catches a glimpse of a slightly buried gravestone he's failed to notice before.

He grabs a large jug of water and a soft brush and begins the painstaking chore of digging up and cleaning the aging and ornately engraved rock. Within minutes, the names of long-forgotten members of this Georgetown neighborhood spring back to life.

"I'm removing layers of moss, bio-growth and pollution from headstones," Tisdale reports, "and I reveal, for the first time in a while, the names of persons, their existence and their life details."

Even though he has spent between 15 to 20 hours a week in the Mt. Zion and Female Union Band Society cemeteries over the past year, the USAFA graduate frequently makes surprising discoveries. It's what keeps him motivated to continue his efforts as a cemetery restoration volunteer.

Upwards of 2,000 persons — the earliest residents of Georgetown and the capitol city of Washington that followed — are buried in these two adjoining historic cemeteries. No one knows the exact number nor most of the names of the souls interred here. Among the dead are free blacks, slaves and slaves-turned-freemen.

"When you touch the stones of the people who were laid to rest there, you begin to connect with what their lives were about and the many great things they did," Tisdale says. "They were pastors of churches, they fought for the Union Army in our Civil War. They ran businesses here in Georgetown, and they were leaders in the local community. And yes, they were just common workers who did stonework, ironwork and woodwork that helped build what became Washington, D.C."

While great progress has been made in recent months to clean up the cemeteries and restore deteriorating headstones, much work remains to achieve the future vision of creating a historic memorial park on the site. ▶

But Tisdale feels compelled to help uncover the lost history of black Georgetown and share those stories with people of all ethnicities.

"This is the story of my community," he explains. "I have to understand my community's history as a whole, not just the select pieces that are shared with tourists now about the post-Kennedy era of Georgetown. Georgetown has a much deeper history for Washington and pre-Washington, and it's a story that says much about America, too."

DIVIDED IN DEATH

Established in 1808 by the Montgomery Street Methodist Church, the burial grounds were for many years used for people of all races, religions and ethnicities within Georgetown.

But according to Neville Waters III, president of the Mt. Zion and Female Union Band Society Foundation that oversees the maintenance and restoration of the properties, another nearby cemetery was opened in 1849 as segregationist sentiments took hold throughout the nation.

"Once the Oak Hill Cemetery opened, white people had their relatives disinterred and relocated, because they didn't want blacks and whites to be buried together," Waters says. "Even in death, there was this mindset of segregation. In some ways it's sad, but it's also an opportunity to learn and grow."

Many of the individuals buried in the cemeteries had simple wooden, sandstone or concrete markers placed on their burial sites. Most of those markers have disappeared through the ages, leaving little indication of where souls now rest.

Burials at the Mt. Zion and Female Union Band cemeteries officially ceased in 1950. Since then, the historic African American properties fell into serious disrepair.

A few hundred headstones still remain, scattered throughout the three-acre plot. Many have toppled over, broken into pieces or been buried beneath accumulated sediment. Some gravestones were removed from their original locations and piled up along the boundary of the cemeteries.

Down the hill and hidden by massive trees is a brick burial vault. The building, once used to store bodies during winter

months, was likely used by the Underground Railroad to hide fleeing slaves escaping northward to freedom.

"Frankly, my first memories of this place as a little kid were very frightening," recalls Waters, a fifth-generation Georgetown resident. "My grandfather would bring me up here, and it was wildly overgrown with bushes, plants and branches. As I grew up, this wasn't an area that I naturally embraced."

By the 1960s, commercial developers began to covet the cemetery properties for potential construction. Waters' father and another local African American leader, Vincent deForest, a historian and preservationist from the Afro-American Bicentennial Corp., launched a court battle to save the historic sites. The two cemeteries were placed on the National Register for Historic Places in 1975 and thus protected from development.

Unfortunately, that protection didn't ensure the long-term survival of the cemeteries. As recent as the 1990s, the properties remained dilapidated and overgrown by vegetation. In 2012, the D.C. Preservation League placed the cemeteries on its list of most endangered places.

For the past five years, Waters has accepted the family mantle of Mt. Zion and Female Union Band protector. Five of his ancestors are buried in the cemeteries.

"My great-great grandfather was known as the mayor of black Georgetown," he says of one ancestor buried here. "Not necessarily by any means of election, but by the fact that he provided services."

Overcoming his earlier fear of the cemeteries, Waters works with a board of directors that helps guide the restoration and maintenance of the properties.

"I inherited the fight," he says. "Today, this property is a much more welcoming and appealing place than what I recall as a child. We're now at a point where we feel like we're poised to take the next step."

Lisa Fager, executive director of the Mt. Zion/Female Union Band Historic Memorial Park since 2018, works with the board and volunteers to appropriately restore the cemeteries and research the history of those buried here. In addition, she's in charge of fundraising and establishing educational programs for school children and other groups. ▶

PREVIOUS PAGES: *Patrick Tisdale '79 pauses to talk about one of the gravestones that has been restored at a historic Georgetown cemetery.*

LEFT: *Patrick Tisdale has researched the best practices for restoration and has implemented those techniques at the Mt. Zion and Female Union Band Society cemeteries.*

NEXT PAGE: *Patrick Tisdale is pictured on the path that leads to a burial vault, which was likely used by the Underground Railroad to hide escaping slaves.*

"At one point in Georgetown's history, 40% of the population was black," Fager reports.

The African Americans often worked in the tobacco industry, she notes, transporting the crop from Maryland fields to the nearby Potomac River port for shipment elsewhere. Other black residents worked for the likes of Martha Washington and Dolley Madison, and many operated successful businesses in the neighborhood. Some interred here were involved in the Pearl Affair, the largest nonviolent escape attempt by slaves in 1848.

Today, due to the gradual gentrification of Georgetown, less than 5% of the current population is black. That's why Tisdale is on a mission to recruit more non-black neighbors to help restore a part of Georgetown's past and thus recognize the important contributions of the community's former African American pioneers — both slaves and free. He's recently recruited more than 10 neighborhood volunteers to help with the work.

The restoration effort gains a helping hand from occasional school, college and church community service groups that spend a few days volunteering at the cemeteries. But for sustainable maintenance help, local volunteers are the key, Tisdale admits.

Fager praises Tisdale for his unwavering commitment to the restoration and education project.

"I'm amazed at what Patrick has been able to do," she reports. "I'm really proud of what we've accomplished so far, but I'm really excited about what's ahead."

She and Tisdale are particularly encouraged by new alliances formed with other Georgetown organizations committed to local history. Many of these groups have ignored the contributions of blacks in the past but are now willing to tell a more complete story of the community's past.

Waters laughs as he mentions that Tisdale is "a brother who isn't a brother." Tisdale shrugs his shoulders at the accolades. "The Academy taught us to embrace what was around us," Tisdale notes. "If you see something that needs help or something that needs to be done, you just go do it. That's what I'm doing here."

DEEP SOUTH ROOTS

Tisdale moved to Georgetown eight years ago after finishing a career with Ross Perot's information technology company, Electronic Data Systems. He and his wife became aware of the historic cemeteries while doing volunteer work at Mt. Zion Church and asked about opportunities to become involved.

Tisdale was drawn to the restoration project when he heard about its strong ties to the local black community.

"When I discovered this was a cemetery of predominantly African American ancestors, it spoke to me," he says. "It goes back to when I was in high school in Columbus, Georgia. I had the opportunity to be in the first class that attended — through integration — what had historically been an all-black high school."

Tisdale also attended integrated military schools when he was younger, so he interacted with different races and ethnicities throughout his early life.

That background, he says, offers him a better sense of the black experience that other whites may not have.

Today, Tisdale says he wants to be of service to the foundation board to accomplish the various goals it hopes to achieve. On any given day, he'll be picking up trash, cutting back brush, cleaning headstones or assembling broken stone artifacts.

"[I'll do] whatever is asked of me in terms of upkeep and care for the cemetery," he reports.

Tisdale also enjoys the detective work that comes with discovering the names of people buried at the Mt. Zion and Female Union Band cemeteries. He and Fager have used census data, taxation records, sparse burial records, newspaper obituaries, manumission documents (official records for slaves given their freedom) and casket maker records to find details about those whose final resting place is here.

In addition, Tisdale has taken over the administration of the foundation's website ***(www.blackGeorgetown.com),*** adding more information and increasing its visibility so the general public can learn about the history behind the two cemeteries and ways to support restoration and education programs.

GRAVE CONSEQUENCES

Just across a stream and up the hill, the Oak Hill Cemetery grounds remain nicely manicured and honor the lives of white Georgetown residents — some famous, some not.

The Mt. Zion and Female Union Band cemeteries, on the other hand, offer a stark contrast to the pristine Oak Hill property — the consequences of decades of neglect. But that's all right, say cemetery boosters.

According to Tisdale, the goal of ongoing restoration efforts isn't to create a model cemetery. Any esthetic upgrades would fail to provide an accurate picture of the divide that existed between blacks and whites in the early years of Georgetown's history.

"We're not trying to make this look like a glam cemetery or a very finished cemetery like you might see in a military cemetery such as Arlington," he says. "We want to respect that the nature of these people's lives and their passing was quite different. It's really about making sure that the grounds are not overtaken by the woods and that it's kept in an accessible, park-like fashion."

Tisdale and other volunteers seek to right as many toppled headstones and monuments as possible. Many need to be deep cleaned due to the accumulation of moss, lichens and dirt.

"My work is to first address the condition of the most vulnerable stones," he explains.

Through internet research and information gleaned from contacts at other historic cemeteries, Tisdale was able to learn the best practices of gravestone restoration.

"We use techniques, tools and solutions that are tried and true … proven by people who maintain our government cemeteries, buildings of antiquity and other cemeteries," Tisdale explains. "Our goal is to restore and clean but in a way that does less harm than the destructive forces that were acting on the stone. We don't use harsh chemicals."

The wooded areas down the hill continue to be cut back to reveal many more gravesites that long ago disappeared from sight. In the course of his efforts, Tisdale has encountered more than a few obstacles. He's dealt with poison oak on several occasions, and a nest of yellow jackets.

"It turns out they follow you a long way when they're upset," he laughs. "It's all part of getting gritty, getting dirty and doing good things."

Tisdale's recent work has uncovered several family plots, where multiple generations of African American families are buried. He points to a restored headstone of a former slave, Lewis Cartwright. Lewis, his brother and his sister were purchased from their owners and subsequently freed by their father, the Rev. Joseph Cartwright Sr., a pastor at Mt. Zion Church. Buried nearby are Lewis' wife and daughter. After receiving his freedom, Lewis participated fully in the black community of Georgetown as a grocer, church sexton and member of the "Odd Fellows" society.

"You'll often find stone walls that were likely family plots," Tisdale says. "Others are outlined in gas pipe, to create a frame around their plot. Our next goal is to repair the walls — not to perfect, but to give some better definition to each burial plot. Then people who come here can see that intuitively and respect it as well."

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EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

The restoration project comes at a fortuitous time in our nation's history, according to Tisdale.

He's heartened by the growing number of school and other groups coming to tour the cemeteries these days. Previous groups were almost exclusively African American, but now they include people of all ethnicities.

"I think this is what needs to happen in America," he says. "The black experience can't be borne on just the shoulders of the blacks in terms of the knowledge and the feeling of it. Those of us who have never walked in those shoes — or had ancestors who did — still can become very connected to and help with the healing that we're talking about in present-day America."

Waters agrees.

"I believe there's a tremendous opportunity to create awareness and education about those who are here on this sacred ground," Waters says. "We can contribute a lot toward the healing, learning and growth that I think is so critical to us becoming … a land of opportunity, of faith and one that would treat people equally."

In the future, the foundation board hopes to create an interpretive center and educational signage throughout the property to inform visitors interested in its history.

Tisdale admits he was sheltered from the deep tentacles of racism that existed in the nation during his childhood and then during his military time. When he transitioned into the civilian world, the continuing racial divide became more apparent to him.

Tisdale hopes his efforts with the cemetery restoration will lead to a greater recognition of that divide among people of all ethnicities and to promote unity in Georgetown and beyond.

"I'm not cleaning stone," he explains. "I'm honoring very specific people who lived here. It brings to life the town that I've lived in … but without an ignorance or filter about its real roots."