

# They were names on headstones until the pandemic. Then they became reminders that ‘Georgetown was Black.’

By [Theresa Vargas](#)

Columnist

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*A handwritten sign alerts people coming from Rock Creek Park that they are approaching the Mount Zion and Female Union Band Society cemeteries. (Dwayne Franklin)*

For a few minutes, in a tucked-away cemetery filled with crumbling markers of mostly forgotten lives, Robert Logan became more than a name on a headstone.

He became a boy who was born in the nation’s capital in 1845 and grew up in Ward 1. He became a big brother to two sisters — one who died at 15 and one who lived to be 100.

He became a young man who attended school and eventually owned a feed store, a lucrative business at a time when people needed horses to get around, and horses needed to eat.

All at once, as a teenage girl stood in front of about two dozen people and described what her research revealed about him, Robert Logan became real. He became a bank account holder, a father of two, a Black man who created a life in Georgetown when it was a much different place than it is now.

The wealthy, mostly White neighborhood that often makes it onto tourists' to-do lists was once the site of auctions of enslaved people and later home to thousands of African Americans.

But you wouldn't know that by walking through it or by thinking back to what you were taught in school.

"I had no idea Georgetown was Black," is a sentiment Lisa Fager hears often.

She is the executive director of the Mount Zion-Female Union Band Society Historic Memorial Park. The foundation [manages the preservation](#) of two adjoining Georgetown cemeteries that served as the burial grounds for thousands of enslaved and free African Americans who once walked, prayed and raised families in the neighborhood.

"People have this idea of slavery, that every Black person was enslaved, and not only that, but that slavery was way down in Georgia," Fager says. The reality was more complex. "The free and the enslaved worked, worshiped and lived together."



*Not far from the grave of Robert Logan, 15-year-old Catherine Duckenfield talks about the life he led. (Dwayne Franklin)*

On the day that teenage girl described Logan's life, Fager stood nearby, listening.

She had been wanting to see an organized effort aimed at uncovering the many untold stories of the people buried in the cemeteries, and finally, that was happening. One young person after another held the microphone and described a life that weeks earlier they hadn't known existed.

It was a moving scene — but not just because of the historical context. How it came about and what may come of it makes it a notable moment for the region's past and present.

The effort grew from the global pandemic, was bolstered by national Black Lives Matter protests and could provide a template for other states to teach young people aspects of African American history that they won't find in textbooks.

"It's so easy to grow up with a skewed understanding of history," says Garrett Lowe, who came up with the idea for the effort. "For me, as a White Washingtonian, third generation, I'm just learning this stuff now at 55."

As Lowe tells it, he would have normally spent the summer tutoring students to prepare them for their college entrance exams. But when the novel [coronavirus](#) caused the cancellation of SAT and ACT tests, he started thinking about other ways to keep young people occupied.

He previously had visited the three-acre plot shared by the Mount Zion and Female Union Band Society cemeteries and been struck by the condition of the grave markers. Many have been toppled, damaged or lost as a result of time and human behavior. When Lowe visited again, he wondered what he might find if he researched some of the names on the headstones that were still decipherable. What he discovered became the basis of a five-week course that he enlisted his childhood friend and fellow Washingtonian, Thomas Duckenfield, to help him lead.



*Garrett Lowe stands in front of a group of young people on the first day of a course he designed to take students beyond the names on the headstones at two African American cemeteries. (Dwayne Franklin)*



*Many of the headstones at the Mount Zion and Female Union Band Society cemeteries have toppled, broken or sunk into the ground over time. (Dwayne Franklin)*

“The vast majority of people in there, their stories are not known,” Lowe says. Some were doctors and businessmen, he says, but many were laborers, cooks and laundresses. “Doing this work is pretty subversive,” he says. “We’re asserting that the poor matter as much as the middle class. We’re asserting that the Black matter as much as the White.”

Duckenfield, a former lawyer who brought a familiarity with genealogy work to the effort, came up with the phrase “Black Lives Matter(ed)”

The point: Black lives matter now, and they mattered then.

To those familiar with the African American cemeteries in Georgetown, the contrast between their conditions and the well-manicured graves of the mostly White people buried at nearby Oak Hill cemetery has [not gone unnoticed](#).

After Lowe announced the class through an email, more than 20 people quickly signed up. Most were high school students, but three were mothers and two were eighth-graders. Lowe, Duckenfield and Fager also pulled their children into the effort. Duckenfield’s 15-year-old daughter, Catherine, is the one who spoke about Logan.

All the participants were given names to research and offered guidance through Zoom calls for the weeks they spent looking through documents and historical vital records for revealing details.

One showed that a man changed professions in his 70s. He went from a carriage driver to a chauffeur.

Another reflected the reluctance of a family to move away from the graves of two children. When those family members were later buried in Upper Marlboro, Md., they placed a marker there, too, for the children.

One of the more surprising findings involved a White woman. She had no African ancestry, Lowe says, but was forced to carry a document indicating she was a free woman, because of how she spoke and where she lived.

About 300 marked graves exist, he says, but undertaker records were used to create a database of about 2,700 names.

“I want to investigate every single person we can,” Lowe says. “I’m in this for the long haul. This is not just a covid project for me.”

He is already planning future courses, one that is expected to start at the end of this month. He, Duckenfield and Fager also spoke to a group of educators in New Jersey about replicating the work in their communities.

“You don’t have to go all the way to Alabama to see Black history — it’s everywhere,” Fager says. For her, one of the most powerful aspects of the experience came in seeing how connected the students became to their people as they tried to fill in that space between the two dates on their headstones. “As I told Garrett, it’s so important to talk about the dash.”



*Lisa Fager is the executive director of the Mount Zion-Female Union Band Society Historic Memorial Park, the foundation that manages the preservation of two cemeteries in Georgetown, where many enslaved and free African Americans are buried. (Dwayne Franklin)*

The foundation is looking into how to best preserve and move the headstones without further damaging them, she says. But she hopes the public also starts to see that space as sacred. People have been known to use the grounds as a dog run.

Because class started at one of the cemeteries, Fager suggested it end at one with a libation ceremony to celebrate the lives that had been lost — and in a way found.

All of the students wore white and, one at a time, brought life to the people they were assigned to research.

Virginia Hawkins became a woman who could read and write, but whose daughter was illiterate.

Frederick Jenkins Sr. became a day laborer and the father to a man who worked in a flower shop before he was drafted for World War II.

Ellen Sinclair became Ellen Rigsby, a woman who married her Scottish enslaver and took his name only after his death left her and her daughter free.



*One of the headstones that sits on the three-acre lot for the Mount Zion and Female Union Band Society cemeteries. (Dwayne Franklin)*