

Someone burned a beloved child's grave in a historic Black cemetery

People have long left toys and cards for a girl named Nannie. After Juneteenth, those gifts were found destroyed.



Perspective by [Theresa Vargas](#)

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They are all gone. The laminated birthday cards. The plastic toy piano. The doll with the blue bow on her head.

Strangers have carried toys into one of the oldest Black cemeteries in the nation's capital and placed them near the grave marker of a girl who lived long ago and not long enough. They brought them for Nannie, and for years, to the amazement of people who regularly visit the cemetery, many of those gifts remained undisturbed.

The weather didn't destroy them. Animals didn't carry them off. Visitors didn't steal them.

Then came Tuesday. On that day, as Lisa Fager tells it, when she went to show a group of George Washington University students Nannie's marker, she found that someone had set the site on fire. Instead of toys and cards, she saw melted plastic and blackened stone.

The moment she realized what happened, she screamed. Then, she cried. Hours later, she was still trying to process what she saw.

"It's a child's grave," she told me. "Who would do that?"

Fager is the executive director of the [Black Georgetown Foundation](#), which has been working to restore two adjoining historic Black cemeteries — the Mount Zion and Female Union Band Society cemeteries — and fill in details about the lives of the people who are buried there.

Fager first told me about Nannie two years ago, and I shared with you how her grave marker had pulled at strangers and left them with questions: Who was she? Had she lived free or enslaved? Who was leaving the laminated cards and vintage toys that appeared at the site around her birthday?

Even during the most uncertain stretch of the pandemic, when people were isolating, someone made the effort to leave a card that read “Happy Birthday, Nannie!”

“There is a power to Nannie’s story, even with the unknowns, or maybe even more so because of them,” I wrote at the time. “She is drawing people to a historic Black cemetery and making them consider what life in Georgetown might have looked like for a Black girl in the 1850s. She is making strangers think about human connections — then and now.”

Little is known about Nannie. Her marker bears no last name. But the two dates on it indicate she died during a time when many Black people remained enslaved across the country and just days before she would have turned 8. “Born May 26, 1848,” it reads. “Died May 18, 1856.”

Researchers have also determined that the quality of her marker shows either someone with wealth cared about her or many people without wealth came together to raise enough money to make sure she wouldn’t be easily forgotten. Many grave markers during that time were made of inexpensive wood, concrete or soft sandstone; hers was made from Virginia bluestone.

Fager believes Nannie was loved in life. We can hope she was. What is known, though, is that she is beloved at the cemetery. The trips people have made to visit her and the gifts they have left for her show that. An artist who grew up in the D.C. region saw a doll there that inspired her to create paintings that were shown as part of an exhibit in New York.

That doll is now gone, Fager told me. A tiny ballerina in a charred skirt remains one of the few recognizable toys at the site.

“People left things to honor her and someone just took that away,” Fager said. “I feel like her life has been taken again.”

Fager said after discovering the scorched scene, she called the number for city services and fire inspectors showed up to survey the damage. I sent a request for information about the incident to fire officials, but had not received a reply at the time of publication. A D.C. police spokesperson said if arson is suspected, fire officials would handle the investigation.

While it’s too soon to know who started the fire and why, the timing has left Fager and others concerned that it was motivated by hate. On Monday, hundreds of people gathered in the cemetery to commemorate Juneteenth. The fire occurred sometime after the event and before Fager discovered the scene the next morning.

Historical anthropologist Mark Auslander, who has done research on slavery, African American cemeteries and Nannie, was there for that Juneteenth gathering. He described the crowd as diverse and the atmosphere as filled with hope. He said people were asking thoughtful questions and saying they wanted to volunteer.

“It just seemed a wonderful example of the community at its best,” Auslander said. On Wednesday morning, he visited Nannie’s marker and saw the damage up close. “I just felt like the world was opening up underneath me. I just had this feeling of, ‘Is nothing sacred?’”

He said he didn’t see any destruction beyond Nannie’s area, and that the damage seemed concentrated on those tokens of affection people had left for her.

“It’s almost as if the expression of love and compassion in the community ... that that’s what was being attacked,” he said.

Fager posted a photo of the site on the Black Georgetown Foundation Instagram page, and the responses reflect a shared outrage and sadness. People have described the destruction using words such as “despicable” “evil” and “heartbreaking.”



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346 likes

blackgeorgetown

Who desecrates an 8 yr olds grave?

Well today I was back at the cemeteries to work with our GW University students and went to show them Nannie has been given since the 1980s and maybe longer. I was going to show them how strangers leave
to be seen. Yesterday it was fine today all the trash and dead bodies and I had to do a little more work.

ner grave. yesterday it was fine, today all the toys burned and destroyed. I broke down in tears immediate
“I am so disgusted that someone would do something so disrespectful like this,” wrote one person.
thinking about how hard it is to get some DAMN PEACE for these Black people in these cemeteries. ❤️

“But the police are finding yesterday involving the top 11 members on this grave and May the ing for the first time. To
haunted by an 8-yr old. #blacklivesmatter
see it vandalized like this is truly disheartening,” wrote another person.

“May Nannie’s spirit rest with peace and the racist violators of her grave be punished,” wrote someone else.

Fager said she hopes authorities find the person responsible. In the meantime, she is looking into installing solar-powered security cameras. She also wants to find a way to honor Nannie.

“So many people are asking, ‘What are we going to do?’” she said. “We are going to figure out a way to honor Nannie bigger and better, and show her she’s still loved. No matter who is coming for her, we got her back. We’re going to give her some peace. I’m determined to do that, if it’s the last thing I do.”

Fager has been undergoing treatment for an aggressive cancer, and she said that as she fights for her life, the incident has forced to her to think about how even after death, resting in peace is not guaranteed for some people.

“When do you get to rest?” she said. “When do Black people get to rest?”