

History buried under weeds

Arley Johnson spearheads plan to reopen deserted black cemetery

By **LYNNE AUSTIN**
The Herald-Dispatch

HUNTINGTON — A rusty padlock on a rickety gate is the only indication that something private lies beyond the view of passersby. Bethel Cemetery rests on a hill about 150 yards south of where Bethel Road meets Norway Avenue. Heavy underbrush, vines and trees shield the 10-acre lot. They also hide a slice of Cabell County's black history.

The legacy of Bethel Cemetery, which dates back to the Civil War era, now lies in the thorns and overgrowth that deter saddened family members from finding loved ones' graves. Although some white people are buried at Bethel, for a time it was the only place where blacks were buried in the city.

"It's like throwing a person away and forgetting about them," said Joyce White of Cleveland, whose 8-month-old baby, John Alfred White, was buried in the cemetery in 1967.

She wants to have her son's grave cleared off and marked with a tombstone, but she hasn't been able to locate it.

"It's so painful," White said. "So many years have gone by and I haven't been able to visit it even to put one flower on the grave."

Spearheading a community-wide effort to get the cemetery cleaned up for Memorial Day, Delegate Arley Johnson, D-Cabell, agrees the once well-manicured site is deplorable. Crumbling tombstones barely peep over weeds; other stones have



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After bushes and ground covering are cut away, a tombstone that had been hidden earlier in the day can be seen as home confinement inmates clear the area. Delegate Arley Johnson, D-Cabell, is appealing to the state and community church leaders to help clean up the cemetery.



Alisa Nance/The Herald-Dispatch

slipped over the hillside. Some inscriptions have been worn away by weather.

"It's like those people are crying out for help," he said. "I'd like to see all of the graves decorated for Memorial Day."

Johnson is appealing to the state and community church leaders to help in a project to clear the brush and vines.



Frank Altizer/The Herald-Dispatch

Home confinement inmates found many damaged grave markers as they worked to clean up Bethel Cemetery.

Scattered within the cemetery's boundaries are the final resting places for several veterans of World War I black units. Some tombstones are

believed to mark the graves of Civil War veterans, but are impossible to read because of

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Bethel

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vandalism and decay.

The property has gone unnoticed for decades by all but a few. A squabble over the ownership has prevented even the most minimal upkeep, even though the cemetery holds historical significance and special memories for many members of the city's black community.

Theresa White of Huntington said when her mother died in the 1940s, all blacks were buried in Bethel Cemetery. That was just the way things were, she said.

The cemetery's current condition breaks her heart.

"It's awful to know she's out there in the woods and I can't do anything about it," White said. "It makes me feel terrible that I can't go find her."

Blacks and whites couldn't be buried in the same cemetery in the days of segregation and those shortly following, said Arthur Williams, retired president of Williams Mortuary.

His father opened the mortuary in 1933 to serve the black community, about a decade after Charles and Mary McClain started their family

If you go

Delegate Arley Johnson, D-Cat is planning a cleanup of Bethel Cemetery on May 28-29. For more information, contact Johnson at 9556.

expanded their services to in-burials. The site they purchased in 1935 was well-suited for its purpose. The property that was to be Bethel Cemetery was already a cemetery with more than 500 graves, though most were unmarked because the people buried there had no money.

The McClain business prospered through the 1920s, '30s and '40s. Mary McClain died in 1959.