

# Historic black cemetery set for restoration

**BY ALEX PERRY**  
STAFF WRITER

In the late 19th century, seven formerly enslaved African-American businessmen and veterans established Oak Lawn Cemetery, one of Suffolk's oldest African-American cemeteries. The cemetery remains to this day a vivid representation of the city's illustrious black history.

The Historic Oak Lawn Cemetery Foundation is organizing a cleanup this May to restore this cemetery and

**See CEMETERY, 7** preserve the history it holds. More importantly, volunteers wish to clear a path for people to pay their respects to veterans, family members and other cherished individuals that impacted this community.

"We're trying to restore it to bring more comfort to the families," said Reginald Dorton, president of the Historic Oak Lawn Cemetery Foundation.

The cemetery is located on a corner lot behind the city's Human Resources Building at 440 Market St. There are hundreds buried in this lot, with some markers dating back into the 1800s.

Among those buried there are John W. Richardson, president of the Phoenix Bank of Nansemond, and Wiley H. Crocker, founder of the Tidewater

Fair Association and Nansemond Development Corporation, according to documents prepared by Nadia Orton, the foundation's secretary and historian.

Beside these community leaders are veterans of Vietnam, Korea and World Wars I and II. One of these is 1st Lt. William H. Walker, a Tuskegee Airman.

But the grounds have fallen into disarray over the years. Overgrowth and leaves have covered many headstones. Others have sunk into the ground from years of rain and neglect.

There are three tiers going down into the ravine beside the cemetery, and each plateau has more graves that are obscured by more trees and shrubs.

Orton recalled stumbling upon the marker for Cpl. William Parks, an African-American veteran who served in the 135th Regiment of U.S. Colored Infantry during the Civil War. She had been walking the grounds of the cemetery for roughly eight years before she noticed Parks.

His headstone was a much older one that had fallen over and was deeply embedded so that the top was flush with the ground, Orton said. His marker was left hidden by leaves just a few inches deep.

"His is just an example

of scores of headstones — and therefore family stories and ancestries — that we have yet to uncover," she said.

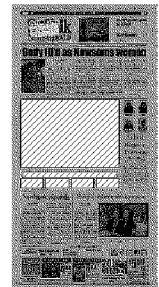
Legislation passed this year by the General Assembly will provide state funding to help maintain Oak Lawn Cemetery and other African-American cemeteries throughout the state. House Bill 2311 was signed earlier this March and includes 468 qualified markers at Oak Lawn.

The foundation will receive about \$5 per headstone to clean, maintain and reset them, along with \$20,000-plus to repair more severely damaged markers. But this is just the start as more markers are rediscovered and qualified for funding.

"We want to make sure that those loved ones that have been buried there (are) remembered," Virginia Delegate Cliff Hayes Jr., the chief patron for HB 2311, said in a phone interview earlier this month.

Foundation members are reaching out to local Boy and Girl Scout troops, churches, schools and other potential community partners to assist in their cleanup this May. Members of the public are welcome to volunteer as well, including those that are in need of community service hours.

The cleanup will be



held from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. May 4. Volunteers will meet at the cemetery and be provided rakes, gloves, weedwhackers, trash bags, safety vests, grabbers and bug spray. There will also be a dumpster for collected debris and vegetation.

The focus will be on clearing the debris and smaller trees throughout the cemetery, with a focus on the three tiers leading down into the ravine. Volunteers are encouraged to wear boots, jeans, long-sleeved shirts and headwear for the sun.

The foundation plans to have these restorations finished in time for Memorial Day on May 27, when an open house will be held to reintroduce the cemetery to the Suffolk community.

For more information on volunteering opportunities and other ways to contribute, visit [oaklawncemetery.suffolk.com](http://oaklawncemetery.suffolk.com).



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