

Posted on Thu, Oct. 27, 2011

New life for an old cemetery

Restoration a tribute to city's rich black history

By JEFF WILKINSON
jwilkinson@thestate.com

As restoration workers dug down into the hallowed soil of Columbia's Randolph Cemetery last month to excavate and repair a damaged headstone, they found a surprise buried underneath: Another headstone.

"There are bodies on top of bodies here," said Jessie Abney, of the Philadelphia firm Kreilick Conservation. "There's no order to it."

Randolph Cemetery is the final resting place of some of Columbia's most notable African-American citizens, including nine Reconstruction-era state legislators. No one knows how many people are buried there, but it is certain there are hundreds more than the 300 to 400 established plots.

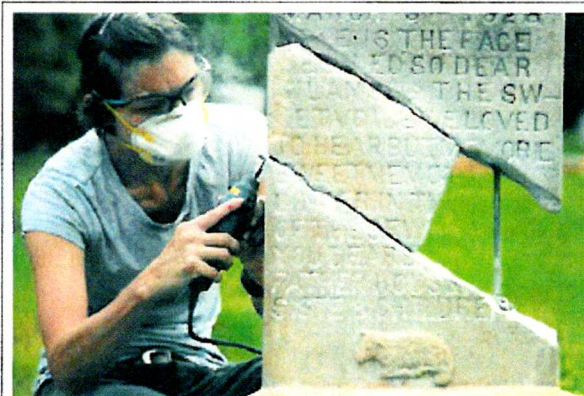
But through the decades since its founding in 1871, the cemetery has been the victim of erosion, vandalism, neglect, indiscriminate burials and the ravages of nature. In 1959, the city even authorized a bulldozing crew and a chain gang to "clear out" the cemetery in the name of urban renewal, until a public outcry shut the operation down.

Today, Randolph Cemetery is on the rebound as one of the premier sites of Columbia's rich African-American history.

Last month, 26 headstones were repaired and renovated, thanks to a \$15,000 grant from the Richland County Conservation Commission. It is the third such project to be undertaken since restoration efforts began in 2005 – 10 years after the cemetery was put on the National Register of Historic Places.

About \$500,000 has been raised since then, in amounts as small as \$25 donations from individuals to \$200,000 in 2008 from the state of South Carolina. While that money has helped clear the cemetery of debris, cut back the weeds that once choked it and repaired dozens of headstones, it is still in need of much more work.

Mike Trinkley, director of the Columbia-based Chicora Foundation, which plots, studies and preserves cemeteries across the country, said that what is most needed is an endowment or trust to take care of the



Project manager and conservator, Dara Friedberg prepares a broken head stone for repair mortar to be added. A team from Kreilick Conservation out of Pennsylvania have been working at cleaning and repairing grave sites in the Randolph Cemetery off of Elmwood Rd. in Columbia. This is the third phase of renovation the historic cemetery has undergone.

- Kim Kim Foster-Tobin /kkfoster@thestate.com



Skilled in working with concrete, Jesse Abney of Atlanta, Ga., helps out on the project. He is preparing to lift and reposition a head stone that has sunken into the soil. A team from Kreilick Conservation out of Pennsylvania have been working at cleaning and repairing grave sites in the Randolph Cemetery off of Elmwood Rd. in Columbia. This is the third phase of renovation the

cemetery in perpetuity.

"It's absolutely critical to think long term," he said.

Mayor Steve Benjamin has made the cemetery's preservation one of his priorities.

"It is sacred ground and it's our job to protect it for generations to come," he said. "If we don't, we risk losing a big part of our identity as a state and as a people."

Randolph Cemetery is located off of Elmwood Avenue in the shadow of the I-126 bridge over the Broad River.

Once a part of the adjacent Elmwood Cemetery, the land was purchased in 1871 by 19 local black legislators and businessmen to establish the first cemetery for the city's African-American community. Before that, blacks were buried near the river in the local potter's field along with poor whites.

The men named the cemetery in honor of State Sen. Benjamin Franklin Randolph, a free person of color from Kentucky who came to South Carolina as a Union soldier and chaplain during the Civil War and later played a major role in the 1868 South Carolina State Constitutional Convention in which black men and non-property owning white men were granted the right to vote.

Randolph was assassinated in 1868 and his body was moved to his namesake cemetery in 1871 when a monument was placed there in his honor.

By 1918 all of the originally planned plots in Randolph Cemetery were sold.

But during the 1920s and 1930s, millions of African-Americans fled the Jim Crow South for greater freedom in Northern cities — a movement called the Great Migration — including most of the descendants of those interred in Randolph.

"There was no one left to take care of the cemetery," said Maewood Belk, president of the cemetery's restoration committee.

Plots were left untended and the cemetery became overgrown. Other black cemeteries were established in the early 20th century, giving blacks more options. By the mid-20th century the cemetery was nearly forgotten.

The cemetery's isolated location made it easy for vandals to wreak havoc. And because there were no written rules about interments, indiscriminate burials took place.

As late as 2000, existing burials were disturbed by new ones. Bones were found scattered. A casket even turned up by the river. Today, no one can be buried in the cemetery unless a valid deed is held.

"The decline was gradual," Chicora's Trinkley said.

historic cemetery has undergone.

- Kim Kim Foster-Tobin /kkfoster@thestate.com



(L-R) Conservators, John Klinkose, Zeke Schladen and project manager, Dara Friedberg, discuss the best way to level pieces of a headstone cross before reassembly. A team from Kreilick Conservation out of Pennsylvania have been working at cleaning and repairing grave sites in the Randolph Cemetery off of Elmwood Rd. in Columbia. This is the third phase of renovation the historic cemetery has undergone.

- Kim Kim Foster-Tobin /kkfoster@thestate.com

NOTABLE INTERMENTS IN RANDOLPH CEMETERY

Benjamin Franklin Randolph, 1820 or 1837-1868

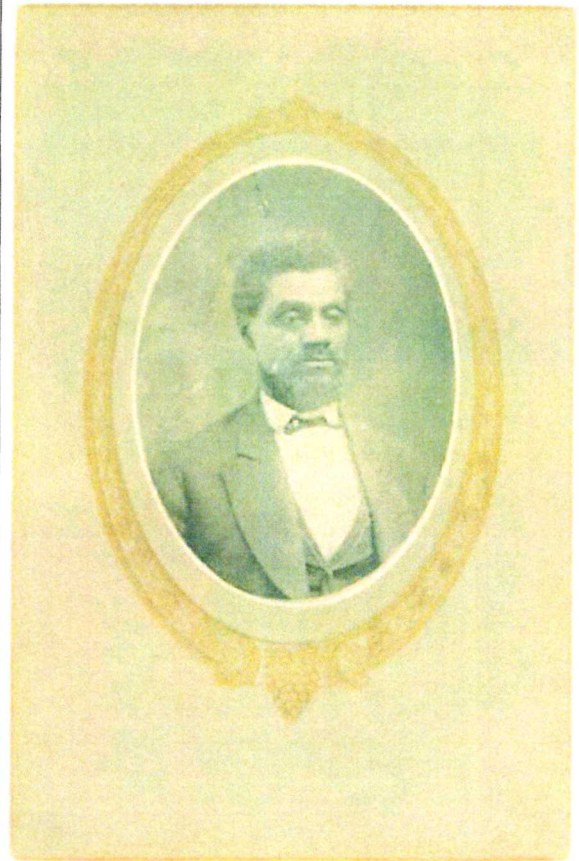
"Cemeteries are born. They live. And sometimes they die."



THE LATE REV. R. F. RANDOLPH OF SOUTH CAROLINA.—ASSASSINATED OCT. 16, 1868.
Photoduplicate of R. A. Cochrane's.

The namesake of Randolph Cemetery, Randolph was active in S.C. Reconstruction politics after coming to the state during the Civil War as a Presbyterian chaplain assigned to the 26th U.S. Colored Troops stationed on Hilton Head Island. In 1867 he joined the Republican Party and represented Orangeburg County during the 1868 constitutional convention and later in the S.C. Senate. He was assassinated on Oct. 16, 1868, in Abbeville County — one of four Republican leaders murdered that year. Despite accusations of Ku Klux Klan involvement, no one was brought to justice.

William Beverly Nash, 1822-1888



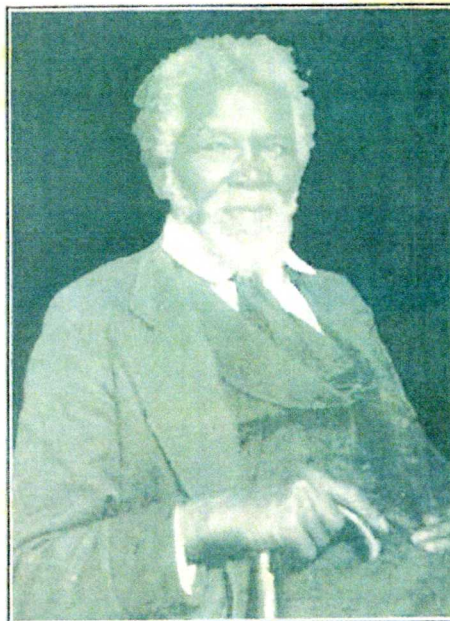
Nash was a free man who served as a South Carolina state senator from Richland County, 1868-1877. Considered one of the state's most influential African-American politicians, Nash was a dynamic individual who held numerous governmental positions including president of the board of regents of the State Lunatic Asylum and director of the S.C. State Penitentiary. A mason and member of a fire company, he also was a brick manufacturer and coal yard operator.

Agnes Jackson Simons, 1831-1907



The only one of Celia Mann's four daughters who stayed in Columbia, Jackson in 1867 inherited the property on Richland Street that was established by her free-black mother before the Civil War. While head of the household, she oversaw a series of major changes at the property, including the construction of the house that today stands at 1403 Richland St. as an historic site.

Rev. Charles Jagers, 1836-1924



REV. CHARLES JAGGERS

Jagers was born a slave in Fairfield County. He became a preacher, which provided enough income to establish the "Jagers Old Folks Home," once located on Elmwood Avenue, for elderly African-Americans. In 1919, he led protests against showing "Birth of a Nation," a film which glorified the Ku Klux Klan. The Columbia Museum of Art has a bronze statue of Jagers in its collection.

George Elmore, 1905-1958

A Holly Hill native, Elmore moved to the capital city in 1922 and successfully ran the Waverly Five-and-Dime store on Gervais Street. In 1947, after being barred the previous year from voting in the S.C. Democratic Party's all-white primary, Elmore filed a federal lawsuit. In the landmark case known as *Elmore v. Rice*, Elmore's legal team, led by Thurgood Marshall, who would become a U.S. Supreme Court justice, prevailed. Following the decision, white vendors wouldn't stock Elmore's store and his finances collapsed. Crosses were burned on his front lawn and his and his family's lives were threatened.

© 2011 TheState.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.thestate.com>