

Restoring honor

Volunteers clean up cemetery in Conestoga that serves as a final resting place for black Civil War veterans who fought for the North.

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Pennsylvania Grand Review, which celebrated the service of African-Americans at the end of the Civil War.

He said his committee plans to "take this experience to the classrooms to put young people close to this piece of history."

"This is for our colored veterans," said Darlene Colon, volunteer site coordinator. "We are giving them the honor they didn't get when they were alive."

Colon referred to the hundreds of African-Americans from Lancaster County who fought in the Civil War and were later buried in cemeteries across the region.

Some of those graveyards are in good shape; others have been neglected.

"Many of the headstones are broken and some are missing. I think there are headstones buried underground from the weather and erosion," said Colon.

The initiative was organized by Pennsylvania Grand Review, and was carried out in cooperation with the African American Veterans Project of Lancaster County; African-American Historical Society of Central Pennsylvania; Crispus Attucks; Veteran's Victory House; and students from Thaddeus Steven College of Technology and Millersville University.

The Cultural and Heritage Tourism Office provided a grant of \$500 to assist with Saturday's clean-up effort.

The Grand Review

In May 1865, thousands of people gathered in Washington, D.C., to mark the end of the War Between the States and express their gratitude to the military forces that had made the Union victory possible.

Even though 185,000 African- American soldiers served the Northern cause and suffered high casualties in battle, black soldiers were not invited to be part of the Grand Review.

The citizens of Pennsylvania, which had sent 11 black regiments to the war, made up for the injustice.

Among the headstones found Saturday at the Conestoga African Methodist Episcopal Church Cemetery was that of Abram Warner.

Warner, of the 32nd U.S. Colored Infantry, was wounded by a bayonet while serving in the Civil War. He died in 1896.

"I knew he was buried here but had never seen his grave," said Lancaster resident Gerald Wilson, a descendant of Warner's.

The cemetery in southern Lancaster County got a much-needed cleanup Saturday when about 40 volunteers banded together to clear waist-high brush, weeds and choking vines that had grown at the site in recent years.

The day-long "cemetery cleanup" was a special preservation effort by the Cultural and Heritage Tourism Office of the Pennsylvania Bureau of Tourism to restore the hallowed grounds to a condition worthy of the men who are buried there.

The burial ground is in a wooded area between Main Street and Valley Road in the village of Conestoga.

The site is deeded to the Pennsylvania State Conference of the AME Church.

Records show that the land for the burial ground was donated to the Conestoga AME Church by Harriet Sweeney, the powwow doctor of Conestoga, in the 1840s. Powwow was a system of folk remedies and magic spells associated with the Pennsylvania Germans.

The church was destroyed by fire in 1904 and the burial ground was often forgotten.

Cutting, chopping, digging, hacking, and pulling, the volunteers made their way up the hill to the site midmorning Saturday, where they later found the headstones, also covered with heavy vegetation.

"Today we hope to reveal this sacred ground and make it available to the people," said Bob Welsh, director of the history committee of the



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The women of Harrisburg organized an event of the same name Nov. 14, 1865, to honor the U.S. Colored Troops from 25 states who were not permitted to participate in the Grand Review of the Armies.

As the nation prepares to mark the 150th anniversary of the war (1861-1865), Harrisburg will witness a reenactment of the state Grand Review, Nov. 5-7.

Testament to sacrifice

Lewis Alston, of Lancaster, was one of the volunteers that joined the conservation effort Saturday.

Alston fought in the Vietnam War as a corporal with the 1st Marine Division, 1st Recon. He is active in the community, volunteering to help homeless veterans.

"What we have here on this site is evidence of the men and their families who sacrificed so much for their nation," said Alston, a chaplain with the Marine Corps League, Lancaster County Detachment 294.

"We went through a lot when we were in service," Alston said. "I feel sadness to see that veterans are being dishonored this way ... their remains on a hill covered in brush."

The volunteers worked diligently to clear the site. Alston searched for headstones, later placing American flags next to those that had been cleared.

"Not many people can say they've helped preserve a piece of history," said Shaday Jones, 23, a senior at Thaddeus Stevens College. "I'm glad I'm here. I respect the sacrifice of these veterans."

Seeking assistance

To volunteer to clean up black cemeteries, to donate to restore the muster rolls or to provide information on an ancestor who fought in the U.S. Colored Troops, call 800-VISIT-PA or log on to visitpa.com.

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