

NEGLECTED CEMETERY GETS \$2,500 CLEANUP

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ABSTRACT

Unfenced, and located near a parks maintenance building and the 18-hole Clifton Park Golf Course, the cemetery became a weedy patch and illegal dumping ground. Roussey rented a Toro Dingo, a piece of heavy equipment that assisted him in cleaning up the five tons of discarded railroad ties, construction lumber and household debris tossed around the cemetery's perimeter.

FULL TEXT

After more than a week of hacking away at underbrush and weedy trees, landscape workers have tamed nearly 30 years of neglect at one of Baltimore's oldest Roman Catholic cemeteries.

The 7-acre St. Vincent DePaul Cemetery, which is surrounded by Clifton Park, has emerged from its first cleanup since it officially closed in the 1980s. Workers cleared away tall grasses, unruly trees and nearly five tons of debris around four sections of askew grave markers and upturned headstones. Their work revealed the names, incised into limestone, of old Irish, Italian and German families who were members of the downtown Baltimore parish located near the main post office.

"I had a great feeling to see where my great-grandmother was buried," said Michael J. O'Brien, a retired research scientist from Buckingham, Pa., who toured the spot recently. His great-grandmother, Margaret Stafford, an Irish immigrant from County Wexford, is one of an estimated 2,000 people buried there before 1965.

"I walked the boundaries, and I was surprised at how large it was," O'Brien said. "It's not a little churchyard. It was amazing to see what it really looked like. It used to be just a thicket. It now looks a thousand times better. It's really a lovely spot up on the hill."

The cemetery, located about three miles from the landmark church at Front Street and the Fallsway, is still owned by the parish. It had no endowment after it closed, and was hard hit by vandals in the 1950s and 1960s. Church officials had the mausoleums taken down and the bodies reinterred. They also had the headstones, many of which had fallen or were in disrepair, placed in groups on the grounds.

Unfenced, and located near a parks maintenance building and the 18-hole Clifton Park Golf Course, the cemetery became a weedy patch and illegal dumping ground. This summer, the church agreed to a cleanup and matched the \$1,250 raised by a group of descendants of those buried in the cemetery. They hired Fred Roussey, who heads lawn care at New Cathedral and Holy Rosary cemeteries.

Roussey, 58, a retired Baltimore police lieutenant, agreed to cut the weeds and trees for \$2,500.

"My price was very underbid," said Roussey, who lives in Catonsville. "I thought it was going to be a simple job. It wasn't. Now that it's finished, I feel it was the right thing to do. The place needed it. The people needed to know something about their loved ones."

Roussey said that when he arrived at Clifton Park, the cemetery was so overgrown he had trouble locating it. "There is almost no access back there. The road stops. You keep asking yourself, 'Where is this place?'"

Frustrated because the cemetery is completely unmarked and unfenced, he flagged down a police officer and asked him where it was. He was shown an approximate location, and he and his crew of six began working 12-hour days to establish the cemetery's rough contours. The work stretched over several weeks.

Roussey rented a Toro Dingo, a piece of heavy equipment that assisted him in cleaning up the five tons of discarded railroad ties, construction lumber and household debris tossed around the cemetery's perimeter.

"We didn't see the headstones at first," Roussey said. "We found four areas where the stones survived. It was like finding treasure. We were very proud of the way it turned out."

The stones contain the names of many old Baltimore families. One marks the burial site of Patrick Sinnott and his wife, Bridget. Dr. Henry Gross, who was born in 1822, lies beneath a limestone column. Sara McGuigan died Sept. 16, 1917, as the Spanish influenza was sweeping through Baltimore and claiming the lives of nearly 5,000 people. Other names were from the DiPaola, Sabitino and Provenza families.

Stephanie Arthur Town of Landenberg, Pa., visited the cemetery and found the stone of her ancestor, Michael Dougherty.

"Although Michael's name was broken off, the rest of the stone contains the inscription for his spouse, Annie Grogan Dougherty," she said, adding that the cleanup work was "outstanding."

Recently, descendants of St. Vincent families began to contact one another on the Internet and assembled lists of those buried there. Several weeks ago, they visited the church rectory and located a map of the cemetery and numbered burial sites. The cemetery once had corridors named after St. Vincent and the saints' names of adjoining downtown parishes - Ignatius, Leo, John, James, Peter and Alphonsus.

The families also decided they wanted to recognize the largely forgotten resting ground. O'Brien met with the Rev. Richard Lawrence, pastor of the church, who agreed to allow the weeds to be cut and to match the initial \$1,250 raised.

By the end of August, the work was under way.

"I went around to each and every stone, hoping to find my great-grandmother's," said O'Brien. "I did not, but I had this warm experience. At least now, something had happened."

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Credit: The Baltimore Sun

Illustration

Photo(s); Caption: Ishmail Billalobos rides a mower through the St. Vincent DePaul Cemetery in Clifton Park. The cleanup is being done by Fred Roussey and his crew of workers. "We found four areas where the [head]stones survived," Roussey said. "It was like finding treasure." Eddie Banegas, left, and Jorge Pena use machetes to cut

away the thick brush that's overwhelmed the cemetery during 30 years of neglect.

DETAILS

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