



Cleaning up part of Houston's history

Thursday, August 21, 2008 | 7:43 PM



By Kevin Quinn

HOUSTON (KTRK) -- It's a place of honor and remembrance, where people are laid to rest. But now, several cemeteries in our area are overgrown and deteriorating. It's a heartbreaking problem for people who have loved ones buried in several cemeteries around town.

There are few who question the significance of the cemeteries where prominent African-Americans who helped build Houston are buried. But volunteers say they can't restore and maintain those sites on their own and some are frustrated by how long it's taking to get help.

When Margott Williams discovered her grandfather and other ancestors buried at the Olivewood Cemetery, the brush was two stories tall.

"It makes me really sad," she said. "It's heartbreaking."

Margott formed a non-profit group with other volunteers and ever since, has spent weekends cleaning it up.

"Once you get that area clean and you start working on that side, then that area starts to overgrow again," she said.

Doing that across six plus acres is no easy task. As they have, they've discovered deterioration of graves, which they believe is due to runoff from nearby properties.

It is a bit of a trek through the thick brush to get to the back of this particular cemetery. Things are so neglected out there that some of the graves even have eroded, exposing some of the bones buried there.

Olivewood is one of three historically significant African-American cemeteries around Houston which volunteers are trying to maintain.

"This is an integral part of the city, an integral part of the city's history," said Patricia Smith Prather with the Texas Trailblazer Preservation Association. "I just think the city ought to take some kind of involvement in this."

The city, though, says there's not much it can do help with upkeep of any of the cemeteries. Each is either privately owned or what entity owns it is unclear. A mayor's spokesperson tells us that city hall is working to help.

"We think historic preservation is very important to our city, very important to our culture," said Pat Trahan with Mayor Bill White's office. "Our cemeteries and historic cemeteries are treasures where we learn more about ourselves."

The city of Houston is looking at ways it can help. It has already talked to at least one property owner near the Olivewood cemetery about the effects of water running off its property into the cemetery. City hall also says it's looking at building monuments, signs or markers outside the cemeteries on public right of ways.

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