

City's first black cemetery tells of buried history



Warren Adams, the city of Boynton Beach's historic preservation planner, shows the grave of Alton Barton during a 2015 tour of the historic black cemetery, Barton Memorial Park. FPG file photo (Kari Barnett/Forum Publishing Group)



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Boynton Beach collecting information on black pioneers

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Neglected for many decades and disturbed by a highway and development, the city of Boynton Beach's first black cemetery, Barton Memorial Park, has a rich history.

Located at 561 NW 12th Ave. at Northwest Fifth Street, the park is named after Alton Barton, who died at age 6 in 1950.

The latest marker dates to 1983 and the cemetery is now closed for burials.

"Barton Memorial Park serves as the final resting place of the ancestors of many of Boynton's African- American families," said Janet DeVries, past president of the Boynton Beach Historical Society.

"This layer of history is coming to light after many decades," she said.

The Barton family still lives in the area and was instrumental in preserving the cemetery when Interstate 95 was constructed through Boynton Beach in the 1970s.

Growing up in the city, Vice Mayor Mack McCray, said: "The cemetery is historically significant and it's important that we preserve and protect the site for future generations."

McCray's godfather, Deacon Willie Pressley, is buried there.

Containing about 20 grave markers in the quarter-acre park, in May 2015, the Boynton Beach City Commission approved the cemetery's historic designation and added it to the city's register of historic places and will be included in the map of the Downtown Heritage Trail.

Warren Adams, the city's historic preservation planner, is looking to collect research about the graves and the city's earliest black residents.

"It's important that the city's black history is recognized from its early days of the pioneers up through the development of the Heart of Boynton Beach and the contributions the black citizens made to the development of the city," he said. "Many pioneers were from Bahamian black families and many of their descendants still live in the area. I'd like to collect as many oral histories, photographs, memorabilia, et cetera from these families.

Thanks to a \$33,000 non-matching grant he received from the Florida Division Of History, Adams is creating a website on the city's earliest black residents, on which he hopes to accumulate research.

As part of his efforts, last February the city paid homage to one of its earliest black residents, Robert E. Wells, by erecting memorial street signs on what is now east Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., originally called Wells Avenue.

Wells was a Bahamian settler who came to Florida to work in the pineapple fields. He platted the land that became Wells Avenue.

"Barton Memorial Park & Cemetery is culturally significant because it was originally a private resting spot and burial ground for black families who could not afford a plot in the city cemetery or were not allowed to be buried there," DeVries said. "The city of Boynton Beach and Warren Adams are both to be commended for their work designating this cemetery as historically significant and for assuming the upkeep."

"It's a tranquil place nestled in the back of the community that can be a place of reflection or a spot to go to mourn those who are no longer with us," she said. "The cemetery has a number of interesting folk markers that illustrate the changes in our society and ones which uniquely reflect the black community and their heritage."

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