

African-American cemetery that dates back to 1900 to receive historic designation

By **Attiyya Anthony**
Sun Sentinel

MARCH 17, 2015, 5:59 PM | BOYNTON BEACH

A cemetery in the Heart of **Boynton Beach** neighborhood may look haphazard and incomplete to some, but city officials say there's a lot of history underneath those tombstones.

In 1900, the parcel now known as the Barton Memorial Park and Cemetery on the northwest corner of Northwest 12th Avenue and Northwest Fifth Street became one of the first unofficial African-American burial grounds in **Boynton Beach**, according to city documents.

On Tuesday, it was expected to become the first cemetery in **Boynton Beach** to receive a historic designation.

Although only about 20 headstones are visible on the grounds, even more bodies were buried there long ago, said Warren Adams, the city's historic preservation planner.

"Some couldn't afford headstones, so they made their own out of wood or had none at all," he said. "Research has indicated there are many other unmarked graves, some of which can be identified by indentations in the ground."

City officials say that the tiny, .26-acre site is a vital piece of the city's African-American heritage and they plan to add the site to the city's Cemetery Trail — a walking tour of the city's cemeteries that details their historical significance.

"We felt it was quite important to the city's history," Adams said. "What better way to trace the history of your city than a cemetery — you have names, dates, professions, gender. It's also an indicator of wealth, religion, social economic status. You are looking at a true historic record of your city."

According to city documents, African-Americans were not permitted to be buried in the city's white cemeteries. So they used a former Indian burial ground near a city dump and called it their own.

Victor Norfus, local historian and member of the Heart of Boynton Neighborhood Association, remembers happier days running as a child with his friends at the cemetery, as well as somber days when he would go to reconnect with lost loved ones at the site.

City officials say that relatives often were buried atop each other.

"It was a poor person's cemetery," Norfus said. "It became a graveyard with no supervision."

Also buried near the front of the lot are Victor Norfus' great aunt, as well as his uncle who died at 12 in a swimming accident, he said.

Victor Norfus' grandfather, Deacon Tom Norfus of St. John Missionary Baptist Church, may be buried behind a Banyan tree on the lot. Deacon Norfus died in the 1950s, and family members say that his burial site may have been dug up to make way for I-95 in the 1970s.

Deacon Norfus' grave was unmarked, like many of the others buried there. City documents state that a handful of unmarked burial sites may have been disturbed with the construction of I-95.

The cemetery was closed for burials in 1959, when official burial grounds for African-Americans were built at Sara Sims Park and Memorial Gardens, 209 NW Ninth Court.

The historic designation for Barton Memorial Park and Cemetery is a significant step forward for the city, Norfus said. "Hopefully, this will show other people and our community that we are important and we should cherish our history and our loved ones."

aanthony@sunsentinel.com or 561-243-6648 or @attiyya_sun

Copyright © 2015, Sun Sentinel
