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Society completes first restoration phase at Harmony Grove Cemetery

July 27, 2007

The Buckhead Heritage Society has completed the first phase of its planned restoration of the historic Harmony Grove Cemetery, located at the southwest corner of West Paces Ferry and Chatham roads in Buckhead.

That work, which has taken three months to complete, consisted of eradicating nuisance growth and removing several trees, and cost approximately \$2,000.

According to the society's newsletter, the landscaping firm of Jay Hort removed tall weeds, dead limbs and debris from the premises and "applied weed killer to the dense blanket of ivy covering the property. Downey's Trees, Inc. also removed several dead and dying trees from the property at no cost."

Phase two of the restoration, which is expected to cost considerably more than phase one, will include removal of the ivy and hiring professional services to locate and mark the graves, which now are expected to number more than 100.

The restoration is being funded entirely through private donations.

Fueled by an admiration for their community's history, the Buckhead Heritage Society, in collaboration with the Buckhead Rotary Club, announced in April its plan to undertake the restoration of the cemetery.

The cemetery dates back to the latter part of the 19th century. Established in 1870, it was originally the familial burial grounds of James H. "Whispering" Smith, one of the largest land owners in the area now known as Buckhead. Harmony Grove Baptist Church was constructed shortly after in the adjacent lot.

Although the oldest marked grave, belonging to Smith, is dated 1872, there are numerous unmarked graves, suggesting that the cemetery predates 1865.

"As the ivy begins to die back, we have noted the existence of even more unidentified graves—some of which may be slave graves—than we initially thought existed in the southern portion of the cemetery," reported Wright Mitchell, president of the Buckhead Heritage Society. "Many of these graves are marked by crude pieces of stone; others are only identifiable due to large depressions visible in the ground. No doubt, the

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area also contains graves that are not visible from the surface of the ground," he added.

"Based on the size of the area where the graves are located and the number of crudely marked graves or depressions in the ground, we believe there may be as many as 100 unidentified burial spots in this portion of the cemetery," Mitchell wrote.

"The large number of unidentified and unmarked graves present unique restoration challenges," according to Mitchell. "In order to properly locate and mark these graves, the dense blanket of dead ivy will have to be removed. Following removal of the ivy, experts trained in the art of locating unmarked graves will probe the area to identify each grave location. The graves will then be physically marked and plotted on a map of the cemetery."

The marked graves represent some of Atlanta's most notable leaders and families. Among those buried at Harmony Grove are John Sims, father of former Atlanta Mayor Walter A. Sims (1922-26) and relatives of actress Julia Roberts.

-John Schaffner



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