

Brotherhood in a cemetery

Jill Thomas

Herald-Citizen Staff

When Ralph Richardson moved to Livingston, it was to get closer to his family roots. As a child, he and his grandmother had occasionally visited Livingston to see family members, and when he married a Livingston woman, Rebecca LaSchell Pincheon, it seemed natural to move from Clay County to Overton County where some members of both their families still live. Richardson's life was changed when he dropped by to visit Cash Cemetery to visit the graves of some of his ancestors.

"Nothing was left," he said.

The cemetery is 169 years old and Richardson said it is known to include the graves of slaves from Overton County as well as soldiers and townfolk. In addition, Richardson believes it contains the grave of the first woman physician in Overton County, Dr. Myrtle Lee Smith.

But all the grave markers were gone and the entire side of the cemetery where the African American residents lay buried was overgrown in weeds and grass.

Richardson then realized he had found his calling.

"I want to restore and preserve this cemetery," he said.

But first, he had to find it.

With a lawn mower and brush clearing equipment, Richardson began to cut back the undergrowth that obscured the old graves.

"I thought I could do it by myself," he said.

"But the more I looked at it, the bigger it got," he laughed.

So Richardson called on his cousin, Clarence Allen, to help out.

The two of them mowed and cleared and cleared and mowed.

"After three months, we knew it was going to be a job forever," he said.

Since both men have jobs, the question was how to insure that there would always be someone available to maintain the cemetery.

"We finally decided to set up a tax-exempt trust fund so others could contribute to the upkeep, restoration and preservation of the cemetery and so we could eventually be paid for the work we're doing," Richardson said.

With Richardson's mother-in-law, Rebecca Pincheon, and the legal advice of Livingston Judges John Officer and John Turnbull, the two established the Cash Cemetery African-American Descendants' Trust Fund at the First National Bank in Livingston.

"At first I didn't think the project would go forward. Area people just didn't seem interested," Richardson said.

Then some began to come to his aid.

Janet Gann, Overton County librarian, helped with research.

Other support began to come from unexpected sources.

Like The Sons of Confederate Veterans organization whose support continues to grow.

"Ed Butler Sr. and Ed Butler Jr. of the Sons of Confederate Veterans in Cookeville have really come through," Richardson said.

"Mr. Ed Butler Sr. invited me to attend one of the Sons of Confederate Veterans' meetings and when I got there, I found out I was supposed to speak!" Richardson said.

"Everybody overwhelmed me that night. I felt I had found people who were really going to help," he said.

"Those two guys (the Butlers) said they'd help and they've been there ever since. Every time I call them, they're there," he said.

And as the land has been cleared, the trust fund has begun to grow although Richardson and Allen have yet to take any money for the work they've done.

"It's amazing. When I sit down and tell people what we're trying to do, more often than not they'll contribute something to the trust fund.

To preserve the cemetery, Richardson talked with Judge Turnbull about getting it entered on the National Register of Historic Places.

"Judge John Turnbull is working on that as we speak," he said.

In addition, Richardson has spoken to Tennessee Tech history professors Mike Birdwell, Wali Kharif and retired professor Calvin Dickinson who have offered to help with trying to obtain cemetery restoration grants.

Randy Williams, historic preservation specialist with the Upper Cumberland Development District in Cookeville, has been out to the cemetery and offered his expertise.

Tomorrow Nicholas P. Herrman, research assistant professor of the Archaeological Research Lab at the University of Tennessee will be visiting the cemetery to give Richardson an estimate of how much it would cost to make penetration tests to find the locations of the graves.

The trust fund has grown to \$1,500 and Richardson, Allen and Pincheon have to decide how best to use that money.

"At first we wanted to set up a memorial to the people who are buried there," Richardson said.

"David Vaughn (of Vaughn's Monument Works in Cookeville) has drawn one up for us, but it will take most of our money to do that."

Right now, the memorial would list at least 164 names -- names of both African American and Euro-American residents buried in the cemetery according to the records kept at Speck Funeral Home in Livingston.

And Richardson thinks that putting up a monument could result in more people in the community supporting preservation of the historic cemetery.

But the money in the trust fund might be needed to do the penetration tests.

"We don't know yet how much those tests might cost, so we want to find that out before finalizing the memorial," Richardson said.

No one knows for sure just how many graves are included on the property. Richardson says there's a third part of the cemetery that is still overgrown and no one has had time to investigate it but he's been told there may be as many as 400 additional graves there.

The project that Ralph Richardson began less than six months ago has become a growing calling for him.

As word spreads about the work being done on the cemetery, Richardson has been getting phone calls and e-mails from people asking him to tell their organizations about the cemetery, and he has received other calls from people asking him to organize preservation efforts for other cemeteries.

Early this month a group of descendants of the some of the African Americans buried in the cemetery came to Livingston to take a look.

"They wanted to tell their children about where their ancestors were buried," Richardson said.

And as Richardson learns more about the cemetery, he is finding out more about the people buried there.

At first, he thought the overgrown section of the cemetery had been for African Americans only. But he has since learned that whites are buried in that section as well.

"This is now about brotherhood. We think this entire cemetery is something that should be restored and preserved," Richardson said.

"Martin Luther King Jr. put it best," he said. "King said, 'Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.'"

* To support the Cash Cemetery African-American Descendants Trust Fund, send any contributions made out in the fund's name to the attention of Marla Kay Etheredge at First National Bank of the Cumberland, 214 East Main St., Livingston, TN 38570

* Or send the contributions in the fund's name in care of Ralph Richardson at P.O. Box 183, Livingston, TN 38570.

* To report any information about Cash Cemetery, call Janet Gann at the Overton County Public Library at (931) 823-1888.

Published October 19, 2004 11:15 AM CDT: Herald Citizen Newspaper, Cookeville, TN

*See History Section / [Other Tennessee Counties/Places](http://www.ajlambert.com) at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>