

Historic Woodlawn Cemetery Coming to Life



BY JOHN MULLER

“Woodlawn Cemetery, the latest to be adapted as a burying ground, is located three miles east of the city limits, on the Benning road. On the highest planes directly in the center of Woodlawn, are still the breast-works of Fort Sedgwick, from which that section of the country was carefully watched when Jubal Early was making his raid on Washington.”

The Morning Times; Sunday, October 4, 1896, page 12

Walking eastward on Benning Road one could easily pass Woodlawn Cemetery, thinking it is just another large rolling hill amongst the many hills that dominate the topographical character of East Washington. The twenty-two and a half acre cemetery, a five minute walk from the Benning Road metro station, is the final resting place for more than 36,000 individuals.

“Freedom is not free. Somebody has to do the dirty work,” said Tyrone F. General, President of the Woodlawn Cemetery Perpetual Care Association (WCPCA), on September 11 as more than 70 volunteers, in col-



laboration with Greater DC Cares, spent the morning clearing debris and cutting grass and overgrowth.

General, a combat veteran with the United States Marine Corps, lost his mother in 2005 and began researching his family history. He discovered his grandmother, Kora General, who passed when he was one year old, was buried at Wood-

lawn. This prompted General to take an active role in the cemetery.

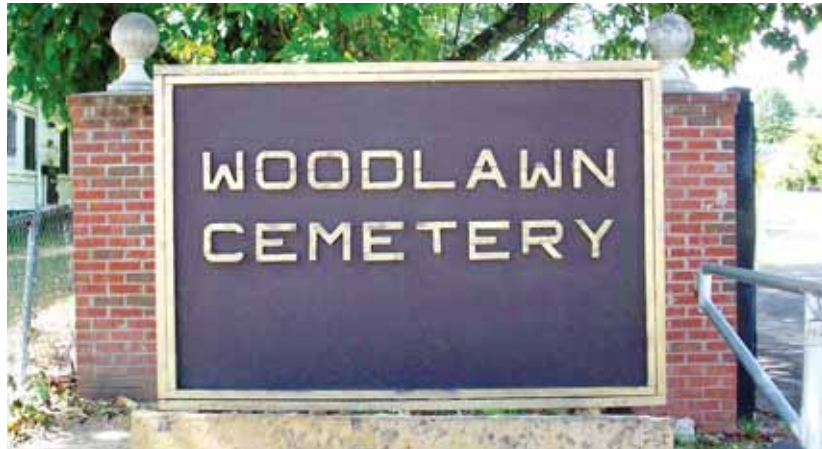
“Without funding, it’s hard to restore some level of respectability. We need to find several revenue streams for regular maintenance. At 23 full grass cuttings a year, that runs \$110 to 120,000. We need someone to notice this place,” says General, who is passionate about working with mem-

bers of the community, government, and private organizations to “utilize the cemetery as an outdoor museum for youth.”

The history of Woodlawn, which opened on May 13, 1895, originates with Graceland, an integrated cemetery founded in 1872, at the intersection of Benning Road and H Street, NE. Faced with the pending

CLOCKWISE from Left

1. Volunteers gather in front of the headstone of Blanche K. Bruce, the second African American elected to the United States Senate and the first to serve a full term.
2. Surgeon and physician John Francis, for which Francis Junior High is named, is buried at Woodlawn.
3. On September 11th, more than 70 volunteers with Greater DC Cares and the Woodlawn Cemetery Perpetual Care Association cleaned up debris and cut grass and overgrowth.



The entrance to the cemetery.

urbanization of the area, officials with Graceland decided to re-locate the cemetery to a more rural area which is where Woodlawn presently sits at 4611 Benning Road SE. Six thousand initial internments at Woodlawn, from 1895 to 1898, were re-internments from Graceland and other cemeteries.

Subsequent internments at Woodlawn include Blanche K. Bruce, the second African American elected to the United States Senate and the first to serve a full term. Bruce represented Mississippi as a member of the Republican Party from 1875 to 1881. Following his Senate term, Bruce served two terms as Register of the Treasury with his signature appearing on US Currency.

Other notable persons buried at Woodlawn are Howard University Law School President and US Congressman (R-VA) John Mercer Langston, surgeon and physician John Francis for which Francis Junior High is named, the first African American to address the US House while in session John Willis Menard, along with other noted civic and local church leaders.

"We're going to keep plugging away. We'd like to see the cemetery rehabilitated to the utmost," says Marie G. Ward, an octogenarian who has been a charter member of the WCPCA since 1972. Ward plans to be buried in her family plot at Woodlawn. Her grandmother was buried in Woodland in 1928 and her mother in 1952.

In honor of the prominence of many of the interred, Woodlawn was placed on the DC Inventory of Historic Sites in 1991 and on the National Register of Historic Places in 1996.

Performance to Highlight Woodlawn

Young Playwrights Theatre (YPT), working closely with organizations east of the Anacostia River, has taken the lead in introducing DC youth and the larger community to the history of Woodlawn through the performing arts.

"In 2004, my wife and I moved east of the river. The backyard to our house on Texas Avenue SE provides a great view of the cemetery. I'd wanted to do something about the cemetery for years," says David Snider, Executive Director of YPT.

Earlier this year, Snider approached General and the WCPCA about a partnership to bring more attention to the cemetery. The collaboration has brought in the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, Maya Angelou Public Charter School, and Life Pieces to Masterpieces amongst others to aid in researching and producing a original play about Woodlawn Cemetery, to be shared in staged readings in the spring.

On February 7, 2011 at 7 p.m. the Gala Hispanic Theatre on 14th Street, NW will host a full reading of play. The play will then tour within DC Public Schools for two weeks and be performed at the National Geographic Museum on the evening of February 17 in celebration of Black History Month.

Mr. General can be reached at papagen-eral@comcast.net / (301) 613-6002. The WCPCA is actively recruiting new members with talent and energy. For more information about Woodlawn Cemetery go to www.woodlawndc.org and Young Playwrights Theater www.youngplaywrightstheater.org ●

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