

Cemetery Seeks Security to Protect History

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In recent years, it's become site of bad behavior

By Jillian Smith

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DAYTONA BEACH - On a 6-acre lot on Bellevue Avenue sits Mount Arrarat, a historically black cemetery built in 1889. It is the final resting place of more than 600 people, including hundreds of veterans from as far back as the Civil War.

Mount Arrarat may have once been plush, green and peaceful, but today it is overgrown, littered and dilapidated.

Dusty Smith is founder of the International Association of Cemetery Preservationists, a nonprofit organization that aims to restore and preserve the Mount Arrarat Cemetery. Despite the efforts that she and other members of the IACP have made, a lack of security on the property has allowed vandals, transients and thieves to inflict damage.

Ms. Smith said she has seen the cemetery used as a place for deviants to use drugs and have sex.

"We've caught people smoking crack in there, and sometimes we find condoms and underwear just lying around on the ground," she said.

Thieves and vandals have also terrorized the cemetery.

"People break and steal headstones and break into the vaults. They have stolen personal effects from graves and even removed bodies," she said.

Ms. Smith said the cemetery should be restored, preserved and appreciated because of its historical value.

"These are the people that built this city, and now no one seems to care what happens to them," Ms. Smith said. "They obviously can't complain for themselves, so we are trying to give them a voice in the community."

To protect the cemetery and deter further destruction, funds are needed to heighten security on the property.

"Even if we could just get some lights put up, that would help," Ms. Smith said. "Florida Power & Light has offered to donate the lights and poles, but we would need help from the city to install them." Because Mount Arrarat is a privately owned property, maintenance and upkeep fall to the families of those buried there and the stockholders of the property.

Though he had never heard of Ms. Smith or the IACP, Daytona Beach city manager James Chisholm said the city is not permitted to work on private properties.

"I know of Mount Arrarat, but no one has approached me with any questions or proposals," Mr. Chisholm said. "If that cemetery is privately owned, though, there's really nothing we can do. The responsibility falls to the owners."

Twelve stockholders purchased the land located on Bellevue Avenue and Clyde Morris Boulevard and opened the cemetery more than a century ago. Over the years, ownership has been handed down to relatives of the original stockholders.

Today, only the Rev. Gussy Sampson and Astrid Mack remain.

Ms. Smith said Mr. Mack resides in Miami, and Ms. Sampson is nearly 90 years old.

"Gussy does all she can, but neither of them are really able to give the cemetery the amount of care it needs and deserves. Our volunteers do all they can, but it doesn't seem like enough," Ms. Smith said. "This cemetery is part of our local history, and we are going to lose it completely if something's not done soon."

For more information on the International Association of Cemetery Preservationists, contact Dusty Smith at (386) 253-6034 or visit <http://www.iacpinc.org>