

Abandoned and Neglected Cemeteries Commission Meeting Summary

October 3, 2007

Steve Rankin
Advocacy Planner
steve@jcci.org



What: Fact-finding meeting of the Abandoned and Neglected Cemeteries Commission.

In attendance: Commission members: Jerry Spinks, Chair. Brenda Ezell, Jon Ferguson, Emily Lisska, Hazel Mack, Joel McEachin, Richard Mueller, Louise Warren. Concerned Citizens: Laurie Caulk, Brent Handley, Daryl Joseph, Len Loving, Johnson Pace, Jr., Shannon Palmer, John Pittman, Natalie Pittman, Larry Rosenblatt, Linda Rosenblatt, Leon Ross, Jim Stephens, Thomas Waters. JCCI Staff: Steve Rankin.

Meeting Time: 9:00 – 10:30 a.m.

Discussion: Mr. Spinks welcomed everyone and noted that a walking tour of four cemeteries on Jacksonville's Northside will be held Saturday, October 6. Anyone interested in attending is asked to gather at the intersection of Moncrief Road and Edgewood Avenue at 9:30 a.m. The cemeteries are in close proximity to each other and can be visited on foot.

Mr. Spinks also explained that the focus of this meeting of the Cemeteries Commission was to explore case studies on effective cemetery preservation and maintenance models in New Orleans, LA, and Charlotte, NC. In addition, he noted that subsequent fact-finding meetings of the Commission will be held from 9:00-10:30 a.m. since a consensus of today's attendees preferred the new time to the previous 8:15 starting time.

Resource Speakers:

Louise Warren (Cemeteries Commission member):

Settlers Cemetery (Charlotte, NC): Ms. Warren provided an overview of a city-owned cemetery located two blocks from the town square in downtown Charlotte. Settlers is as much a pleasant inner-city park as it is a cemetery, a concept Ms. Warren indicated could be emulated in Jacksonville.

- Settlers is not laid out in typical grid fashion, but in random family groupings.
- The first known burial in Settlers was in 1768.
- Not on the scale of a "grand" cemetery, Settlers is nonetheless very attractive and has made efficient use of the assets it has.
- Preservation of Settlers Cemetery was one of the first projects undertaken by Chicora Foundation of Charleston, SC, one of the nation's foremost providers of cemetery preservation services and information.
- Settlers is surrounded by a 5-foot embankment which has an attractive wrought-iron fence on top of it. Outside the fence are a series of plaques that serve as a directory of who is buried in the cemetery.
- The cemetery has gone through periods of long-term neglect and periodic attempts at beautification, but at present it is in pristine condition. The first beautification efforts began in 1906 under the direction of renowned landscape architect John Nolen. After falling back into a state of neglect, the

cemetery's next flurry of work came in the 1950's, with the most recent work dating from 1968.

- The innovative landscaping and oversized fountain within the cemetery combine to reinforce the park-like nature of Settlers. Today, it serves as a model for what proper attention and dedication can produce in historic burial grounds.

Chicora Foundation (Charleston, SC): Ms. Warren discussed the applicability to the Commission's work to one of the nation's leading cemetery preservation organizations, the Chicora Foundation based in Charleston. Founded in 1883, Chicora provides a variety of services in cemetery preservation, including marker inventories and assessments, grave identification, mapping, historical research, planning, and archaeological investigations. With a professional staff headed by Michael Trinkley, Chicora represents a great resource to any organization or volunteer group interested in cemetery preservation, and they are available for assistance on such subjects as landscape architecture, historic research, conservation, and archaeology.

Shannon Palmer:

Save Our Cemeteries, Inc. (New Orleans, LA): Ms. Palmer briefed the Commission on an organization formed in 1974 by four individuals in response to the proposed demolition of nine blocks of wall vaults in a New Orleans Cemetery (St. Louis Cemetery #2). Structured as a 501©3 organization, Save Our Cemeteries has expanded its services to include preservation and maintenance work at cemeteries throughout the State of Louisiana. No contractual agreement exists, however, with the City of New Orleans or Orleans Parish.

- Save Our Cemeteries focuses on three objectives: restoration, preservation, education.
- Services provided by the organization include grounds maintenance, cleanups, coordination of volunteer groups, tour guide training, and daily tours.
- Major restorative work is done in partnership with professional conservators and preservationists who bring in experts in the fields such as masonry, plaster, and metal work.
- Save Our Cemeteries has a small paid staff headed by an Executive Director. There is also a 37-member volunteer Board of Directors.
- The organization leans heavily on volunteers, recruited through media, newsletter, internet, word-of-mouth and events/fundraisers. Volunteers perform such functions as cleanups, weeding, raking, filling, washing, painting, etc.
- Funding comes from a variety of sources: memberships, local historical organizations, state historical preservation office, national trust, national foundations, private foundations, federal government, commercial enterprises, and fundraisers.
- Save Our Cemeteries is a highly-efficient, professionally run volunteer organization that serves as a model for those interested in organized cemetery preservation in other communities.

Cemetery Recovery & Preservation Trust of Jacksonville, Inc.: Ms. Palmer is the principle organizer of this local non-profit (CRPTjax) founded in 2007. The group, which loosely models itself after Save Our Cemeteries in New Orleans, is preparing to file for 501©3 status in the near future. Its vision is to coordinate cemetery preservation projects in Duval County and to provide the necessary resources for success.

- The mission of CRPTjax is to record, preserve, maintain, and protect the historic cemeteries of Jacksonville, and to increase public appreciation and awareness of the value cemeteries provide communities.
- CRPTjax is looking to partner with other local historical and preservation organizations to inspire and educate the community on ways they can participate in preserving cemeteries in the community.
- Services CRPTjax will provide include cleanups at specific cemeteries, coordination of volunteer groups, "how to" assistance to groups looking to "adopt a cemetery", equipment and supplies, cemetery access, events, tours, lectures, etc.
- Similar to Save Our Cemeteries, CRPTjax intends to raise funds through grants, memberships, donations, and fundraisers. It will eventually include a staff similar to that of Save Our Cemeteries.
- Ms. Palmer, while acknowledging that CRPTjax is yet to get off the ground, emphasized that the

organization wants to find its niche and play a prominent role in the eventual recommendations of the Cemeteries Commission. The group has written its bylaws but has not yet filed for its 501©3 status.

- Ms. Lisska noted that identifying other organizations to partner with CRPTjax would be important since there are a number within the community that could help make the overall project successful. Ms. Palmer emphasized that it is the intention of CRPTjax to associate itself with as many viable partners as possible.

What We Heard Today: A review of the meeting's most salient points.

- The Save Our Cemeteries program in New Orleans recognizes the economic value of cemeteries. This should be applicable to the situation in Jacksonville as well.
- It is unlikely that significant funding will be forthcoming from the City of Jacksonville for cemetery preservation and maintenance. We need to focus on volunteers and donations.
- It is increasingly obvious that the government bureaucracy will not be able handle the cemeteries problem. Therefore, the solution has to a major volunteer effort coordinated by a group such as CRPTjax.
- It costs \$1,000 or so to remove a tree in typical Jacksonville cemeteries, so it is obvious that the \$8,000 available in the City's Cemetery Preservation Trust fund doesn't provide a meaningful boost.
- Chicora Foundation represents a major resource to any group or organization interested in cemetery preservation or maintenance.

The meeting adjourned at 10:30 a.m.