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Woman works to restore historic Gadsden cemetery

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By Dixon Hayes

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Source: Dixon Hayes/WBRC

GADSDEN, AL (WBRC) - A Gadsden woman is restoring a historic African-American cemetery in the city.

Southern Hills Cemetery, also known as Sixth Street Cemetery, began in 1826 as a burial ground for slaves, then evolved into a pauper's cemetery.

But it also houses a lot of history-making citizens, including war veterans and business people.

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"We have the first African Americans to own a grocery store, the first African-Americans that actually owned the first funeral home here, the first for barbers, and several entrepreneurs are up here in this cemetery," Chari Bostick explained.

Bostick started the Grace Heritage Association, a group devoted to restoring the cemetery.

"I have family that's buried in this cemetery, that I cannot find, as of yet. And I took this project on, went to the Alabama Historic Commission and had it placed on the historic registry," Bostick said.

As some 79 years of kudzu and neglect are cleared away, she's finding not only history but vandalism.

Workers found a utility pole that was driven into a grave decades ago.

Tombstones were knocked over and graves even broken into, and just this past week, human bones were found nearby.

"Beer bottles, all sorts of things are up here because, you know, people don't care or are not very respectful of the graves that are up here, Bostick said.

One big help for the cemetery: a large gate at the entrance. Hopefully one that will keep out the four wheelers that have damaged so many of the historic graves.

Still, only four of the acres of this land are clear. And with a state ethics law that limits how much the city of Gadsden can help, Bostick is looking for all the help she can get, to make this a historic showplace.

A cleanup for Southern Hills Cemetery is set for Saturday, July 18th, from eight a.m. until 11:30 a.m.

The cemetery will be accessible from the dead end of South Sixth Street.

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