

Cemeteries Commission Meeting Summary

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

In attendance: Commission Members: Jerry Spinks, Chair. Brenda Ezell, Jon Ferguson, Marion Graham, Emily Lisska, Hazel Mack, Joel McEachin, Richard Mueller. Concerned Citizens: Matt Armstrong, Laura Lee Corbett, Brent Handley, Bill Jabor, Jr., John Johnson, Daryl Joseph, Len Loving, Sarah Miller, Mary Mizell, Johnson Pace, Jr., Shannon Palmer, Kenneth Peele, Jr., John Pittman, Natalie Pittman, Linda Rosenblatt, Leon Ross, Dwight Sayles, Ann Staley, Thomas Waters. JCCI Staff: Steve Rankin.

Meeting Time: 9:00 – 10:30 a.m.

Discussion: Mr. Spinks welcomed everyone and briefly described the walking tour of three cemeteries in the Moncrief Road/Edgewood Avenue area that took place on October 6. He noted that the purpose was to acquaint the Commission first-hand with the varying kinds of conditions that exist in the city's cemeteries which led the City Council to form the Cemeteries Commission. A series of photographs from the tour were displayed for those in attendance.

Mr. Spinks noted that the subjects of this meeting focus on a case study of cemetery preservation in Pensacola, FL, being provided by Margo Stringfield (Archaeology Institute at the University of West Florida); and activities of the Florida Public Archaeology Network that may apply to the Cemeteries Commission's work, provided by Sarah Miller (Director of NE Florida Chapter).

Margo Stringfield Presentation - The highlights of Ms. Stringfield's presentation were as follows:

In 2000, several members of the University of West Florida staff and others became interested in a downtrodden cemetery in the heart of urban, historic Pensacola called St. Michael's Cemetery. Dating to colonial times, St. Michael's was originally a British cemetery established around 1778. Located in what was a blighted area seven years ago, St. Michael's was the victim of neglect over a period of years, and an act of vandalism in 2000 energized a group of concerned citizens who recognized the cemetery's historic significance to the community to find a way to restore it. St. Michael's is now a well-maintained eight-acre green space that serves as a model for what can be done with dedication and a willingness to learn. Several factors impacted a change in the immediate area surrounding St. Michael's, but it has been converted from a depressed area to an upscale urban redevelopment project.

- A private non-profit foundation (SMC Foundation of Pensacola, Inc.) is the owner of record and manages the site, but it receives considerable assistance from archaeologists at UWF. Because of the success the group has had there, it now offers its assistance to other cemeteries in the area, providing a resource for them to draw on and to share information. The foundation has no paid staff and utilizes members of the archaeology department at UWF to help.
- Initially, limited funding was obtained through the University of West Florida, enough to map the cemetery and do an initial cleaning of the facilities. The group started from scratch since no management plan existed when they became involved.

- Recognizing that no one in their small organization knew what to do or how to do it, they relied on the successful models of Charleston, SC, and Savannah, GA. Once St. Michael's became such a model itself, the group used it as an example for implementing similar programs at other Pensacola cemeteries. Efforts were made to identify contact persons at each area cemetery and to encourage them to adopt the St. Michael's model. The goal was to provide the necessary spark to get every cemetery on the same path as St. Michael's toward conservation and preservation.
- The organization has adopted a branding strategy for Pensacola cemeteries, labeling them as *outdoor museums*, a concept they feel people can rally around.
- Ms. Stringfield stressed that cemetery preservation should be presented in such a way that it is recognized as an *economic resource* for the community.
- Funding of the non-profit organization is obtained primarily through grants, including such sources as the State of Florida, Florida Department of State, Division of Historical Resources, Florida Historical Commission, etc. A minimal amount of funding also is provided by the City of Pensacola and Escambia County. St. Michael's also qualifies for some funding from the State since it was designated in the 1960's as a "state park" because of its historic significance.
- The Foundation identified a way of obtaining financing for the future removal of fallen trees at St. Michael's by requesting that the County conduct a simple survey of the trees in the cemetery. Once this was accomplished, the groundwork was laid for removal of the trees at the County's cost the next time a natural disaster (tropical storm, flood, etc.) occurred in Pensacola.
- To make projects like this work in the non-profit arena, it is critical to develop *partnerships* with as many groups as possible that can provide assistance in any way. Examples cited by Ms. Stringfield included tapping into the local military where on Saturday mornings marines are engaged to assist with heavy-lifting projects. She also emphasized the value of developing relationships with local colleges and universities that can assist in many ways (i.e., student volunteers seeking community service credit, archaeology departments that can potentially develop a deep involvement such as that at UWF, etc.).
- Ms. Stringfield strongly cautioned that groups looking to improve conditions at a number of cemeteries cannot make the mistake of trying to do everything for everybody, but should focus on developing a viable model(s) and then be available to point others in the right direction to get what they need to get started.
- A major point of emphasis in Pensacola is *getting the message out*. Developing friends in media circles to create public attention is more than half the battle.
- Don't make the mistake of interfering with the character and historic value of cemeteries when attempting initial aggressive cleanups. It is not OK to alter the character of the facility by tossing out broken stones, etc., in the interest of tidying up.
- Efforts are underway to establish a *Cemetery Trail* in Pensacola that will showcase each of the city's cemeteries.
- While welcoming the interest of everyone, the approach of the Foundation in Pensacola is that they "own" St. Michael's and retain complete control of the management of the site. They do not permit anyone to do work in the cemetery without permission of the organization.
- One means of avoiding complaints from outside sources once a group decides to restore an abandoned cemetery is to advertise in a local newspaper that you are working on a specific site. Require that anyone who objects present written documentation of their affiliation with the cemetery and their reason for objecting. Few, if any, objections can be expected, but having gone through the exercise provides the group with leverage in dealing with any subsequent individuals who may come forward in the future.
- Ms. Stringfield suggested contacting appropriate individuals at local colleges who are involved in grant requests. They will be aware of all potential grants available and can be of assistance.
- In using high school students for cemetery work in return for community service credit, the Foundation meticulously tracks the number of hours worked. By applying an hourly wage rate to the volunteer hours, they can use this information to their advantage in matching grant applications. Student volunteers are provided in advance with a set of guidelines on what to wear, what they will be doing, how to do it, etc. They are fully supervised on site and provided additional training as necessary.

- While acknowledging that inmates of corrections institutions constitute a source of volunteer workers, Ms. Stringfield explained that in Pensacola they do not make use of them because of the need for additional volunteer manpower to supervise them.

Sarah Miller Presentation: Director of Northeast Florida Public Archaeology Network

Ms. Miller directs the activities of a regional archaeology office located in St. Augustine that covers seven counties in Northeast Florida. The organization is part of a statewide network. She noted there are a number of potential ways for the Cemeteries Commission to utilize the services of her group, particularly in regard to public outreach programs. She first became involved in cemetery work with a previous employer in 2002 in Kentucky. After getting a crash course in cemetery maintenance and restoration, she became part of a state-funded group that was dispatched to various parts of Kentucky to trouble-shoot cemetery issues.

Ms. Miller summarized the work of the Florida Public Archaeology Network and its potential applicability to the Cemeteries Commission as follows:

- The primary goals of the Network are public outreach; providing assistance to local and city government; and preservation of state historic resources.
- She emphasized that efforts in public outreach (i.e., *getting the word out*) occupy most of her group's time and represent the main area of potential assistance to the Cemeteries Commission.
- The Archaeology Network works closely with Flagler College and community colleges in the area. Among other things, they provide workshops to archaeology classes. She noted that students and members of archaeology clubs frequently need community service hours and are a logical source of volunteer assistance. The Network also provides summer internships that could be offered as cemetery preservation work.
- The Network hosts a quarterly round-table meeting of professional archaeologists from the area. Ms. Miller noted that this group would be interested in assisting and should be considered a resource by the Commission.
- The Archaeology Network derives most of its funding from grants from various sources (small matching community education grants, "Save Our History" grant, etc.).

What We Heard Today:

- Don't try to "eat the whole cake" at one time. Start small by working on one or a few sites with the goal of developing a model for others. Then try to expand the concept as interest increases.
- Assisting abandoned and neglected cemeteries is a learning process. Some things will work, others won't, but you have to persevere.
- Creation of *relationships* with a wide variety of organizations that can provide assistance is critical in developing a plan to address cemeteries on a large scope.
- Colleges and universities represent a great resource in several ways, including manpower, expertise, funding sources, etc.
- In a city with a large Navy presence, don't forget about the potential of assistance from the military.
- "Outdoor museums", the tagline used for cemeteries in Pensacola, represents a way of appealing to the general public. "Specialized parks" might also be applicable in Jacksonville which boasts the nation's largest parks system.
- The concept of a "Cemetery Trail" is being planned in Pensacola and could be duplicated in Jacksonville as a means of linking various cemeteries..
- Inmates of corrections institutions represent a source of volunteer help if they are assigned to tasks that limit the potential of damage.

The meeting adjourned at 10:30 a.m.