

U.K. visitor inspired by Evergreen Cemetery cleanup

By Philip McEvoy, visiting from Kent, England

As a visitor from Kent, England, here to research a book, I have only 10 days so every hour counts. But then I saw an article in last Monday's Times-Dispatch about the cleanup at Evergreen Cemetery.

Before I knew it, I was swinging a brush-hook in the hot Virginia sun, sweating like a fountain. And loving every minute of it.

Richmonders: you've got to try this. Everyone's welcome, and you will leave there with a warm glow that comes from more than just good honest sweat.

At first, I was attracted to the cleanup because there's a connection with my research. I'm writing about Polk Miller & His Old South Quartette, the first interracial act to tour America and to record.

Polk Miller was a white Virginian, born in 1844 on a wealthy plantation, who grew up playing with the enslaved boys and learned to pick banjo. Later in life, after serving as a Confederate soldier and building a successful drugstore business in Richmond, he got together a quartet of African American singers. They toured for 10 years and were admired by Mark Twain who introduced them at Carnegie Hall in New York.

Some of the quartet members are buried at Evergreen.

So I got in touch with Marvin Harris, the cleanup organizer mentioned in the Times-Dispatch article, hoping my names could get onto some kind of a list to watch out for.

After a few minutes on the phone, I realized the priority today is to get the cemetery cleared. Step two will be getting the plots mapped, cataloged and put online.

Suddenly it was "Thursday morning, count me in!"

Marvin Harris is determined to get the job done, and it's a huge job. I love the way he puts it: "It's an elephant, and we're gonna eat it one bite at a time."

Sure enough, in our 3 hours, eleven of us tackled half an acre and revealed dozens of headstones. It was very moving to see one family name appear, then right next to it, the same family name again. And again. There was also the grave of a World War One soldier, with the stars and stripes proudly planted in front of it.

This all really brought it home to me. This is what it's all about. People will be able to come back and rediscover their family connections. Pay their respects. Richmond is reconnecting with a massive part of its history. It's that important.

Just behind our section, we could see the fine monument to Maggie L. Walker that has been revealed and restored to its proper state. Nearby, another monument recently emerged from the briars to everyone's surprise. It was the final resting place of Reverend J. Andrew Bowler, the pastor of Mount Olivet Baptist Church whose house on Leigh Street in Jackson Ward is flagged by a historic marker. Now at last, his memory can live on. Who else lies beyond the next tangle of briars?

Marvin Harris is tireless and I admire his focus. Clearing the cemetery of overgrowth is part of it, putting in place systems for perpetual care is also in his sights. You don't need to have relatives buried at Evergreen to see it's worthwhile. Marvin himself has no ancestors here, he simply feels it's the right thing to do. Hats off to the guy, he has a project that really motivates a lot of people.

More sponsors and donations would help but what he especially needs is more people, and maybe you, reading this, can be one of them to make a difference. Most of the group had jobs to go to after the cleanup, yet they found ways to fit it into their week. Nobody gets paid to do this, but I understand why they get involved.

Because damn, it feels good.