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CITY CEMETERIES

Initiative aims to preserve history

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Correspondent

Alongside its heroic and beloved, much of Norfolk's history lies buried in the city's century-old cemeteries.

The sacred gravesites, solemn monuments and surrounding gardens pay silent tribute to wars, social struggles, art, architecture, horticulture and people.

Bobette Nelson, 40, Norfolk's Bureau of Cemeteries cultural resource manager, wants to bring to life the history and give voice to the heritage.

"We're very excited about our new Cultural Resource Management Program (CRMP)," said Nelson. "The primary goal is to build community support for the conservation of these important cultural resources."

Recruiting more volunteers is vital to the program's success. In the last year, volunteers have logged nearly 5,000 hours in the historic cemeteries. Local military personnel provided 1,600 of those hours. But more help is needed.



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The drainage system of the Core Mausoleum, left, is failing. If it's not repaired, the structure eventually will collapse. "Recording Angel," right, by sculptor and Norfolk native William Couper, guards the Couper family plot at Elmwood Cemetery.

Volunteer Donna Bluemink, 68, is a seven-day-a-week, one-woman army. Whether updating data bases, trimming ivy or straightening statuary, she's a whirlwind.

"I first met Donna through her volunteer work in the Sargeant Memorial Collection at Norfolk Public Library," said

Peggy Haile-McPhillips, Norfolk's city historian. "I wish I could clone her!"

Dubbed the "Fantastic Four," administrative volunteers Bluemink, Diane Renfrow, Dot Strawhand and Suzy Ward-Fleming provided almost 1,100 hours of services last year.

"My motivation is finding people from Norfolk

that we've lost to history," said Bluemink, who lives in East Belvedere. "My job is to bring them back."

According to Nelson, a "hands-on, roll-up-your-sleeves" citizen advisory committee is working to establish a non-profit foundation – Norfolk Society

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for Cemetery Conservation. With Norfolk attorney Caryn West donating her services, the bylaws and articles of incorporation have been filed.

"Although the cemeteries are owned and operated by the city, the monuments and tombs are considered personal property," Nelson said.

"Through fundraising and grants, the foundation would provide additional resources for preservation."

Not far from the cemetery office in Elmwood stands the Core Mausoleum, made famous in the photography of Charles Borjes and the local history writings of the late George H. Tucker.

The drainage system on the massive granite monument is failing. If not repaired, the structure eventually will collapse, according to Nelson.

Nearby, Norfolk native William Couper's breathtaking 8-foot bronze "Recording Angel" guards the Couper family plot.

The nationally acclaimed sculptor also cast the soldier atop the Confederate Monument in downtown Norfolk. Other examples of his work stand throughout the historic cemeteries.

Encompassing more than



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Volunteer Donna Bluemink, left, and cultural resource manager Bobette Nelson work closely with other volunteers to preserve Norfolk's historic cemeteries.

350 acres of real estate, the eight memorial gardens speak volumes on Norfolk's past. Each grave and every monument is a story waiting to be told.

Until the mid-1960s, Norfolk's cemeteries were segregated.

A triple-thick brick wall separates the traditionally white Elmwood Cemetery (1853) from its historically black neighbor, West Point Cemetery (1827).

Just steps from the wall in West Point, Bluemink found Annie Banks' grave. Her life loosened the bricks in Nor-

folk's wall of segregation.

The Virginian-Pilot covered Banks' 1949 burial under the headline "Prominent White Norfolkians Honor 84-Year-Old Servant at Funeral Service." Her pall bearers included W. L. "Billy" Prieur, clerk of the Circuit Court, Clyde H. Jacob, Circuit Court judge, and Calvin H. Dalby, city director of public safety.

Banks nurtured the Dalby/Dodson family for nearly seven decades. She mended dolls, sewed party dresses, bandaged cuts and dried tears. No one knew Annie's actual birthday so the family celebrated it on Valentine's Day.

There's now some discussion about moving Annie to the Dalby/Dodson plot in Elmwood.

"After all, she was part of the family," explained Wilson B. "Chip" Dodson III, a Norfolk attorney and former

member of the school board.

Nelson takes little credit for the CRMP's successes stressing that the initiative is a team effort.

"The program has the strong support of City Council members Dr. Teresa Whibley and Barclay Winn," Nelson said.

"Dr. Whibley started our first two 5Ks for us and Mr. Winn has been instrumental in supporting the volunteer program."

Volunteer workdays are scheduled on four Fridays and Saturdays in the spring and fall.

Staff and volunteer horticulturalists conduct tours amid Forest Lawn Cemetery's 65 species of trees from March through May.

The community outreach program also will conduct "A Photographic Tour of Historic Elmwood Cemetery" at the Pretlow Anchor Branch Library from 7 to 8 p.m. on March 25.

The group needs a little more help from its friends. Nelson is looking for stonemasons and contractors willing to volunteer their time to fix some of the larger monuments. Donations for gardening tools are always appreciated.

With thousands of graves to maintain and countless more stories to tell, the work goes on for Nelson and her volunteers.

"I'm just not going to let Norfolk forget who lived here," said Bluemink.

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For more information or to volunteer, call Bobette Nelson at 441-2654.

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