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Uncovering HISTORY: 'Buckhead just grew up around' old burial ground

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Staff

Wright Mitchell was huffing along on his regular jog that spring day last year when something caught his eye. An c
In Buckhead?

Mitchell stopped and peered at the burial marker, its tip nearly hidden by a tangle of scrub and young trees. In a neighborhood filled with stately homes atop sloping lawns, the marker was an unexpected sight. It looked like a bi
finger, pointing toward the clouds.

Looking more closely, he saw other monuments in the shadows and gloom. Ignoring the bramble, he walked into
brush and came upon Harmony Grove Cemetery.

Mitchell stepped into a reminder of Buckhead's earlier days, when the community was hardly more than a few roa
curling through sprawling, wooded tracts. Now, the 137-year-old cemetery, located at the corner of West Paces Fe
and Chatham roads, is undergoing a renovation.

On a recent morning, Mitchell, 37, walked carefully among the stones that dot the cemetery, named after a Baptis
church that once stood nearby. "I had been by this corner a million times and never knew this was back here," sai
Buckhead native.

It was easy to miss until the **Buckhead Heritage Society**, a nonprofit organization Mitchell founded, stepped in to
a face-lift. In the past year, society members and others have cut away undergrowth, trimmed trees and restored
the stones. They also have determined that the cemetery contains more than 170 graves -- 41 named, the rest
unidentified.

Some of the monuments, milled smooth by machinery, bear the names of long-gone Atlantans. Many more are ro
pried from the ground and set on end, commemorating people whose names are probably lost for all time.

Some of those unnamed graves may contain the remains of slaves or African-Americans emancipated by the Civi
said Mitchell. An architectural historian concurs.

Marietta Monaghan, a doctoral student at Georgia Tech who has been studying the Buckhead community for abo
years, thinks the site could be the resting place for slaves or people freed after the war.

Before the war, said Monaghan, it wasn't uncommon for whites and slaves to worship in the same church -- slaves
balcony, whites sitting below.

"So why wouldn't they be buried in the same cemetery?" she asked.

Landowner James Smith created the burial ground, according to a 1931 historic survey. Smith, who listed eight sl
property in an 1860 census, was the first to erect a stone with a name on the site.

That name: James L. Smith, the landowner's infant son.

Mourners placed him in the ground in 1870.

Others may have been buried at the site already, Monaghan said.

Some of the plots, she noted, hint of African-American burial practices: They are dotted with pottery, cups, bottles and other kitchen items.

According to some historians, the habit of placing "offerings" on graves may date back to Africa, where some communities placed items used in everyday life atop the plots of the departed. The practice continued in some So communities until the 1940s.

Mitchell pointed to a shard of pottery, white in a splash of sunlight. It rested in front of a rock the size and shape of a football, its narrow end shoved in the earth. Architects determined that the site contains four graves.

Who is there? Mitchell shrugged. "We'll probably never know," he said.

Katherine Dickey Marbut, whose home is on West Paces Ferry Road, knew a cemetery nudged marble shoulders against her side yard. In summer months, Marbut said, she'd keep a wary eye out for copperheads, which lived in the burial ground's leafy crevices.

She fretted that they'd bite her pugs, Mamie and Ellie.

Earlier this year, when volunteers began cutting away at the bramble, Marbut watched the cemetery emerge from the undergrowth. She was spellbound.

"I had no idea it was this extensive," said Marbut, who has lived at her house for 12 years.

Old cemeteries can surprise people who were unaware of them, agreed Christine Neal, an archaeologist with the Department of Natural Resources. An expert in old burial grounds, Neal has advised the **Buckhead Heritage Society** on Harmony Grove's restoration.

Georgia may have anywhere from 40,000 to 70,000 old cemeteries, Neal said. They range from single graves in fields to cotton fields to family plots behind tumbledown barns.

And more may still be hidden away in forested folds, she said.

Harmony Grove, she said, is typical of many long-ago cemeteries. It was tucked away on a corner, barely noticed. "Buckhead just grew up around it."

And Buckhead, she noted, is just one community. "They [old cemeteries] are everywhere," she said.

Some, like Harmony Grove, need only a passer-by to jog a renovation.
Photo

RICH ADDICKS / Staff

Buckhead native Wright Mitchell, founder of the nonprofit **Buckhead Heritage Society**, stumbled upon Harmony Grove Cemetery while jogging. The society is renovating the 137-year-old burial ground. A Baptist church once stood nearby.

Photo

RICH ADDICKS / Staff

Pictured is a weathered headstone in the cemetery at West Paces Ferry and Chatham roads.

Photo

RICH ADDICKS / Staff

This headstone is one of several that are dated prior to the turn of the 20th century.

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