Officials push to chart graves digitally at Oakwood Cemetery

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In Montgomery's oldest cemetery, more than 80,000 people are buried in 38,000 burial sites. Some sites have up to five bodies stacked on top of each other. Many gravestones are blank because the family couldn't afford the per-letter cost for engraving a name. Others once had a name but are now worn smooth.

Oakwood Cemetery, with graves dating to the early 1800s, is the last resting place of country legend Hank Williams, along with everyone from governors to slaves. Now, historians, municipal workers and volunteers are partnering to make sure those names and their final resting places are not lost to time.

They've created an interface so that anyone with a smartphone can digitally verify and geolocate graves at the cemetery using an app and a step-by-step guide. Those records are being compiled so that they can be accessed by the de-

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Nida Jackson, center, trains volunteers how to gather and record gravesite information as part of the Oakwood Cemetery geotagging project at the cemetery in Montgomery, Ala., following a press conference on the project on April 16. MICKEY WELSH/ADVERTISER

Graves

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scendants of those buried there.

"How would you feel if you came out here and you couldn't find your family, and it's because... the gravestone has just eroded away?" said Pat Clark of the Montgomery County Historical Society. "We figured we need to get this stuff in digital hands so that it can be accessed by everybody.

"I think this new interest in ancestry among the younger generation, this ought to play right into it. And so much can be done online now that it just makes sense to use the tools that are out there."

People can sign up to chart gravesites by going to mchsal.org/Oakwood. There's a tutorial there developed by Air Force Maj. Kris Kripchak and his wife, Kay Wolff Kripchak, that covers everything from the basics to how to handle unusual situations. For instance, a grave may have four family members under one unmarked stone.

The city's senior GIS analyst, Nida Jackson, created the interface for volunteers after realizing that only 7,000 of the 38,000 handwritten cemetery records — which had been painstakingly entered by other volunteers over years — could be accurately mapped. City IT Manager Savio Dias said the city then invested in technology that allows them to geotag specific grave sites through the volunteer process.

It's a daunting task. The cemetery stretches across 120 acres. But several volunteers showed up on a rainy Friday morning to learn more and get started, and some sites were completed in minutes.

Volunteers rallied last fall to help the cemetery with a different problem after the Montgomery Advertiser reported that city workers were struggling to maintain the grounds with a thin crew during the pandemic. That struggle has continued after the volunteer cleanup effort.

The city has in the past used inmates on work release to help cut the grass and maintain the cemetery, but work release programs were halted in March 2020. Since then, a crew of five city workers have been responsible for maintaining the cemetery as well as 300 empty lots across Montgomery.

"They have just worked themselves to death. They don't have enough people," Clark said.

Still, other local cemeteries have had it worse over the years. Montgomery City Council President Charles Jinright said the county has 16 unowned or abandoned cemeteries, a discovery they made after reports of problems destroyed graves and exposed remains at Lincoln Cemetery. "People created cemeteries and made money off them, and when they got through making their money they left them," Jinright said.

Jinright noted that residents took charge of Lincoln Cemetery and helped improve it.

Clark said the goal is to eventually expand the new volunteer geotagging effort to other cemeteries across the city.

"There are monuments to individuals, and I have no idea what they did," Jinright said. "... That's what changed us, and you don't know who all got changed because of what we did in those early years."

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