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HISTORIC PRESERVATION



Courtesy photo/Richard Gladden

St. John's Cemetery Association volunteers pose for a photo Saturday at the site outside Pilot Point.

BUSINESS



Art bar, pizza joint or music venue? The Pony, east of the Square, will be all three

# 10 years on, advocates renew fight for St. John's

Group seeks access to long-hidden Black cemetery near Pilot Point

By Christian McPhate Staff Writer

Local civil rights activist Willie Hudspeth and fellow advocates have spent the past 10 years trying to restore St. John's Cemetery, a historic freedman cemetery on the outskirts of Pilot Point.

Landlocked by private property, it has perhaps 400 burial sites, a majority of them unmarked graves of people from the St. John's community, a freedman town that disappeared in the 1920s, much like dozens of other Black communities in the South due to racial violence and Jim Crow laws.

Two years ago, Denton County commissioners voted to quit funding the cleanup of the historic cemetery after seven years and left it up to Hudspeth and other volunteers to work out with the landowners.

"We do not fund any other cemetery within the county," Precinct 1 Commissioner Ryan Williams told constituents. "I think it's right for us not to be paying for something that we don't pay [for others in the county]."

The St. John's Cemetery Association was Hudspeth and other advocates' response to that decision,



Tomas Gonzalez/DRC file photo

Pink flags mark the traces of long-forgotten burial sites at St. John's Cemetery in September 2016 in Pilot Point.

and they're asking people to get involved in their efforts "as they work to uncover the history of the St. John's community and protect the final resting place of the African Americans who comprised it."

Last week, the new organization launched the "Buried Twice: Memory, Truth & Justice" series to raise awareness about St. John's Cemetery and their struggle to get public access to the site, mobilize community support and restore the burial ground.

At least 56 gravesites have been identified — with six of those occurring between 1880 and 1890, marked by large elaborate headstones at the cemetery, according to the group's "Buried Twice" presentation Saturday at Emily Fowler Central Library.

"It's just by God's guidance that we found the cemetery," Hudspeth told about a dozen people in

attendance. "... There was no way I could have found that. You wouldn't ever have thought it was a cemetery. It was all grown over, large trees all inside the cemetery, all in it."

Hudspeth was joined by Richard Gladden, a Denton attorney who represents the cemetery association, and Jessica Luther Rummel, a former local researcher who flew in from out of town to host the presentation on Saturday.

"We're going to kind of dispel some myths and just put some facts on the table so that we're all in this community looking at this situation from the same point of reality," Luther Rummel said. "That's very important these days. I feel like sometimes that's our struggle. We're not all sharing the same reality."

"So I want to put these facts on the table today and make sure that they are on the record as we move

forward with our fight."

The Klan

First was recognition of what happened to the St. John's community that the association connected with Denton's Quakertown, a freedman community that was forced to relocate from downtown to Southeast Denton in the early 1920s, in part due to heightened racial violence in the region.

Some of the facts offered by the St. John's Cemetery Association included federal Census data from 1920 and 1930 that revealed "an equally dramatic and rapid reduction in Denton County's Black population" after nearly 40 years of consistent and exponential growth in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

"Just as was the case in Denton, vigilante Klan behavior and overt threats of racial violence against African Americans who got too close to Pilot Point began to increase around the turn of the century," Luther Rummel shared in the presentation.

"In an incident so egregious it was covered by *The Dallas Morning News* in the summer of 1898, a local group of Whitecaps, a term often used by local first-generation Klan circles, erected a large sign in the middle of Pilot Point ordering all African Americans to leave the area, lest they be subjected to violence."

Threats of lynching followed — as did a 1921 case of two young Black men

See CEMETERY on 2A

UNT ATHLETICS



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FRISCO



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