



Historic Gettysburg cemetery locked

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The locked gate at the historic Lincoln Cemetery in Gettysburg has been the matter of local debate. A caretaker says the padlock is to keep out children and tourists who damage the grounds. (EVENING SUN PHOTO SHANE DUNLAP)

Betty Myers says the decision to chain the gate of Lincoln Cemetery was made after she saw two Boy Scouts chasing between the graves and accidentally toppling a Civil War headstone.

"All I'm trying to do is protect the history," she said Monday. "It was opened to the public, but the heavy traffic and lack of discipline and respect has caused graves to sink and stones to be pushed over."

Myers first chained and locked the cemetery, a once-popular tourist attraction included on Civil War walking trails, three years ago to deter youth groups and ghost tours.

Along with the padlock, there's a sign on the gate that reads:

"Please respect the efforts to preserve the history, if you look carefully you will see that many stones are leaning, due to heavy pedestrian traffic ... we cannot have the gate open for large groups and paid guided tours or ghost tours. They do not make contributions for the damage that occurs."

There's a phone number to call Myers, who provides the location of the gate key for those visiting family members or small groups with a "sincere interest" in the history.

This arrangement has aroused objections from some visitors and Myers spoke out last week during a public meeting of Gettysburg residents, defending her reason for locking the gate.

"We have to decide, do we preserve the history that reflects the black citizen?" she asked. "Or do we leave it open to be vandalized and trampled?"

The Lincoln Cemetery

Project Association Inc. was established about 11 years ago to raise funds to maintain and repair the cemetery. The association pays for liability insurance and two years ago spent \$8,000 to reset fallen headstones.

Similarly, the Borough of Gettysburg mows the cemetery lawn and cuts weeds around the graves at an estimated cost of \$2,600 a year.

"Part of the dispute is the public saying that, because taxes go to the mowing, the cemetery cannot be locked," Myers added.

Located near the Gettysburg recreation park on Long Lane, the cemetery was established in 1867 when the Sons of Goodwill, a civic-service organization, purchased a half acre for \$60, with the exclusive purpose of burying the black dead in Gettysburg.

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In 1906, trustees from the AME Zion Church wanted to move black graves from a cemetery east of town. The trustees purchased a small plot, now part of the Lincoln Cemetery, to re-inter these remains. And sometime during the 1920s, members of a local Elks Lodge purchased the western edge of the cemetery.

In the cemetery are the remains of 30 black soldiers who fought in the Civil War, and Myers said it's the only memorial to the black history of Gettysburg.

But the cemetery fell into disrepair and by the 1980s it was considered abandoned property, Myers said. All of those who worked to establish the cemetery had died and the borough had taken over mowing the grounds.

In the 1990s, Myers was approached by a group of individuals planning to restore the cemetery. Soon after, work began to repair toppled gravestones, raise money for a fence, and restore the grounds.

"It was restored to preserve the only concrete history of the colored troops," she said.

Recently, the locked cemetery has attracted the attention of borough management and Myers said she was told to unlock the gate for the entirety of Mother's Day weekend. Instead, she only unlocked the gate for Sunday.

"I'm always happy to take people in and talk to them about the history," she said. "It's just not open for people to run their dogs in there."

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