

Harrow BME Cemetery restored after desecration

BY DANIEL SCHWAB

HARROW — For Elise Harding-Davis, a once “sickening display” has been restored to greatness.

Harding-Davis, a member of the North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre in Amherstburg, was on hand at the British Methodist Episcopal Cemetery in Harrow Sept. 2, for a rededication ceremony.

Over the past decade, gravestones on the site have been desecrated three times.

Harding-Davis said she used to regularly drive past the cemetery on her way to work.

Last year, on the day she noticed the newest incident of vandalism, she wasn’t sad —she was angry.

“It’s a particular type of violence to desecrate a cemetery,” she said. “It speaks to society’s lack of respect. There’s something wrong when people lash out in that kind of vicious way.”

She then went to work with Ken Turner, vice-president of the Ontario Historical Society, and the pair took their concerns to the Town of Essex.

“The town immediately

appreciated what we were talking about,” Harding-Davis said.

Plans for a restoration project were then brought to town council and given the green light.

Since July, Harding-Davis, Turner, the Rotary Club of Harrow, Norm Becker, a doctor of engineering and F. Volpatti Construction Inc., have worked to restore the site.

The broken gravestones were re-assembled with cement and reinforced with metal rods, and a fence was installed around the perimeter of the cemetery.

For Harding-Davis, the rededication ceremony was a “resurrection of sorts.”

“A lot of the names on these markers I know through family, so it’s very personal to me,” she said.

Among those buried at the site are Rev. Noah C. Cannon, the first black African Methodist Episcopal minister and a man named Albanion, who was a member of Albanion Jubilee Singers who sang before Queen Victoria.

“These are significant people,” Harding-Davis said. “In any other culture they would be respected and prized. We respect and prize our significant indi-

viduals as well, and this is a great day.”

Turner said the site dates back to the mid-1800s. The oldest gravestone is from 1850.

The area was also used as a religious meeting ground by the local black community.

“The cemetery was left sort of abandoned and forgotten,” Turner said. “When I first saw the site in the early 1990s, the stones were all broken and stacked into piles in the corner. I always drove by and thought, ‘why isn’t anybody doing anything about this?’”

Turner estimates that about 30 to 40 people are buried in the cemetery.

“It’s a very important site,” he said. “There are literally thousands of people descended from the people buried here.”

Essex Mayor Ron McDermott and Deputy Mayor Percy Dufour were also on hand to commend the efforts of those involved in restoring the site.

Essex MP Jeff Watson honoured the individuals with certificates that read, “Thank you for your tireless efforts in preserving the black thread in the Canadian tapestry.”



Deputy Mayor Percy Dufour, left, and Ward 2 Councillor Richard Meloche stand in front of a newly restored gravestone at the British Methodist Episcopal Cemetery in Harrow Sept. 2. A rededication ceremony was held at the site after a number of vandalized gravestones were restored and a fence was built around the perimeter.

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