

The Buried History of Slavery

Little-known graveyard may be a metaphor for early black life in Washington and Greene counties

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By Joe Smydo, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Nearly 20 years after she graduated from Jefferson-Morgan High School, Marlene Bransom approached her former civics teacher to ask about slavery in Greene County.

"Oh," she recalled him saying, "there were never any slaves north of the Mason-Dixon Line."

Unknown to the teacher and perhaps many other people, hundreds of slaves toiled on the first farms in Washington and Greene counties. Among other efforts to promote black history in Greene County, Bransom and fellow researcher Bill Davison hope to clean up and put a plaque at a graveyard where some of the slaves may have been buried.

Old survey records identify the place on state game lands in Gilmore as Nigger Run Cemetery. Hidden in a tangle of brush and branches, the names of the interred lost to history, the ill-named graveyard may be a metaphor for early black life in the area.

So much, Bransom and Davison said, is unknown or untold.

"It's like we never existed in Greene County," said Bransom, 48, who grew up in the Pitt Gas area of Jefferson and now lives on Mount Washington and teaches English in the Pittsburgh Public Schools.

For years, she and Davison have picked through a tangle of genealogical records, census tables and other raw data trying to piece together the black community's story and find their own roots.

Their first monograph, "Early African American Life in Waynesburg, Greene County, Pennsylvania," is at the printer and may be published before Black History Month ends Feb. 28. The work, to be placed in area libraries, addresses such issues as slavery, the Underground Railroad, religious life and the black community's contributions to America's military.

Bransom and Davison, 54, a retired Equitable Gas Co. employee from Waynesburg, said the monograph will be the first in a series about black life in Greene County communities. The two also are collaborating on an account of the Davison family's interactions with about 20 other families. Their work will detail intermarrying between early black and white families. "It'll raise a bunch of eyebrows," Davison said.



Bill Davison tries to read one of 17 tombstones unearthed during a day spent exploring a little-known slave cemetery in Greene County, just north of the Mason-Dixon Line in an area where many people assumed slavery never existed. (Robert J. Pavuchak, Post-Gazette)

A handwritten survey, dated Nov. 17, 1934, counted "one white grave" and "about 30 Negro graves" at Nigger Run Cemetery. The graveyard is a stone's throw from Crabapple Valley Road, originally named Nigger Run Road and then called, until about a year and half ago, Negro Run Road. An 1876 atlas shows a Nigger Run Schoolhouse nearby.

The naming of Nigger Run reflects something between "reckless disregard" for the sensibilities of black people and an "out and out mean-spirited intention to insult" the black community, Harvard Law School Professor Randall Kennedy said.

But it wasn't unique.

In his new book, "Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word," Kennedy said the slur over the years had been incorporated into the names of "scores of landmarks on official maps" throughout America. It was a reflection, the book said, of the white man's power.

Beginning in the 1960s, growing disenchantment caused some of the names to be changed, if only from "nigger" to "Negro." Today, the book says, some find "nigger" so offensive that they believe use of the word amounts to oral violence.

It's unclear how the slur became a prominent place name in Gilmore, which at the time of the 2000 census had 294 white residents and none who were black.

However, folklore abounds.

The area may have been along an Underground Railroad route, residents said, or inhabited by slaves or by black people who were free but poor. Township Supervisor Jeff Rode, who lives along Crabapple Valley Road, recalled hearing that a group of black people once occupied shacks in the area and lived a slave-like existence as farmhands to one of the county's big landowners.

For years in conversation, locals have used Nigger Run as a point of reference without meaning disrespect to black people, said Bob Rice, 78, longtime resident of Gilmore's Jollytown area.

The names Nigger Run and Negro Run may not be well known to outsiders.

Maps often give a township road number instead of a name, and until a year and a half ago, people living on the road used a rural delivery number instead of a street address for their mail.

When the county implemented a 911 system requiring a street address for every home, two residents of Negro Run Road asked the supervisors to adopt a new name. Rode said the residents didn't consider Negro Run an appropriate name or want it on their mail.

He didn't know why or how long ago Nigger Run Road had been renamed Negro Run Road. The schoolhouse shown in the 1876 atlas is long vanished, and residents said they knew nothing about it.

In his book, Kennedy said nigger is derived from the Latin word for black, *niger*, and had become an insult by the early 19th century. That's the time the Gilmore graveyard may have been used.

The site's one intact headstone, leaning against a tree, is so weather-beaten the inscription is illegible. After reviewing a photograph of the headstone, historical preservationist Terry Necciai of Pittsburgh

estimated it dates to somewhere between 1790 and 1850. Davison said he believes the stone, once ornate, was used to mark the white person's grave.

A walk around the graveyard revealed pieces of about 15 other markers. Davison said he believes these were smaller, unadorned fieldstones used to mark the black graves and may not have had names inscribed on them.

"I'd love to find somebody visiting and then to ask ... why?" said Davison, who wonders whether any of his ancestors are buried there.

The graveyard is along the Jollytown Road in southwestern Greene County, a few miles north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Davison and Bransom believe slaves were buried there. Thomas Mainwaring, associate professor of history at Washington and Jefferson College, said that's possible.

Pennsylvania's first settlers from Virginia and Maryland brought slaves with them. William Penn, the state's namesake, owned slaves. So did David Bradford and his Whiskey Rebellion nemesis John Neville, Mainwaring said.

While slaves in other states toiled in tobacco and cotton fields, he said, slaves in what are now Washington and Greene counties probably helped clear the land and raise crops such as rye and wheat.

Greene County was part of Washington County until 1796. The 1872 Slave Register listed 376 slaves, including 20 owned by one person. In all, about 6 percent of the county population owned slaves then, Mainwaring said.

While local history groups promote the area's role in the Underground Railroad, the history of slavery here isn't well known, something Bransom learned from her conversation with her former civics teacher. "He was an excellent teacher," she said.

In their publication about Waynesburg's black community, Bransom and Davison will flesh out the story by providing census data about slaves and reprinting manumission papers that gave some their freedom.

Davison said his great-great-great grandfather, Daniel Ferrell, was a slave to Jefferson's founder, Thomas Hughes, and earned his freedom by digging 5,000 bushels of coal. Black life in Jefferson will be addressed in a later monograph planned by Davison and Bransom.

Meanwhile, Davison has written President Bush to seek national recognition for the Gilmore graveyard and two other sites -- in Cumberland and Perry -- said to hold the remains of early black residents. He found no markers at what he believes to be the Cumberland site and has been unable to pinpoint the location in Perry.

He and Bransom are welcome to clean up the Gilmore graveyard, provided the effort is coordinated with the game lands foreman, said Douglas Dunkerley, wildlife conservation officer and land management supervisor with the Game Commission. A plaque or marker, he said, would require a permit from the commission's Harrisburg office.

Davison said the attics of Waynesburg and other towns may have family Bibles and other documents that would help unravel the history of the black community. However, he said some people may be reluctant to share information about slavery and intermarriage.

He and Bransom bear the dead ends and other frustrations because the breakthroughs are so sweet. About five years ago, Davison sat down to an awkward dinner with Joseph Hughes, a descendant of the man who owned his great-great-great grandfather Daniel Ferrell.

"He apologized," Davison said, "for what his family did to mine."