Black Walnut Cemetery Restoration Project
Portage Des Sioux, St. Charles, Missouri

by
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The cemetery had the appearance of Halloween and neglect, overgrown brush, and low-hanging tree limbs. One report from years ago warned of snakes.[1] Another report described that a particular flood cut a slough through the cemetery.[2] Old gravestones were leaning at treacherous angles or lying flat. Many were buried. The wooden sign marking the cemetery's spot was visible, fortunately. Otherwise, the cemetery would not be found by the casual seeker. Beginning almost two hundred years ago, locals buried their family members in this plot of ground.[3] Portage des Sioux, this 'Land Between the Rivers', the Mississippi and the Missouri, was home to some of the earliest settlers in St. Charles County.

The cemetery, known as the Black Walnut Cemetery, had its public beginning on 8 July 1826 when Moses B. and Mary Best Robbins deeded over this acre, a portion of the land they lived on, to the trustees and church wardens of the township of Portage des Sioux, for use as a cemetery.[4] We do not know whether or not this acre served as the Robbins family burying ground before it was deeded to the township. However, Moses died in 1818; his son, Thaddeus died in 1823; a second son, Samuel H. died in 1826.

View in May 2020

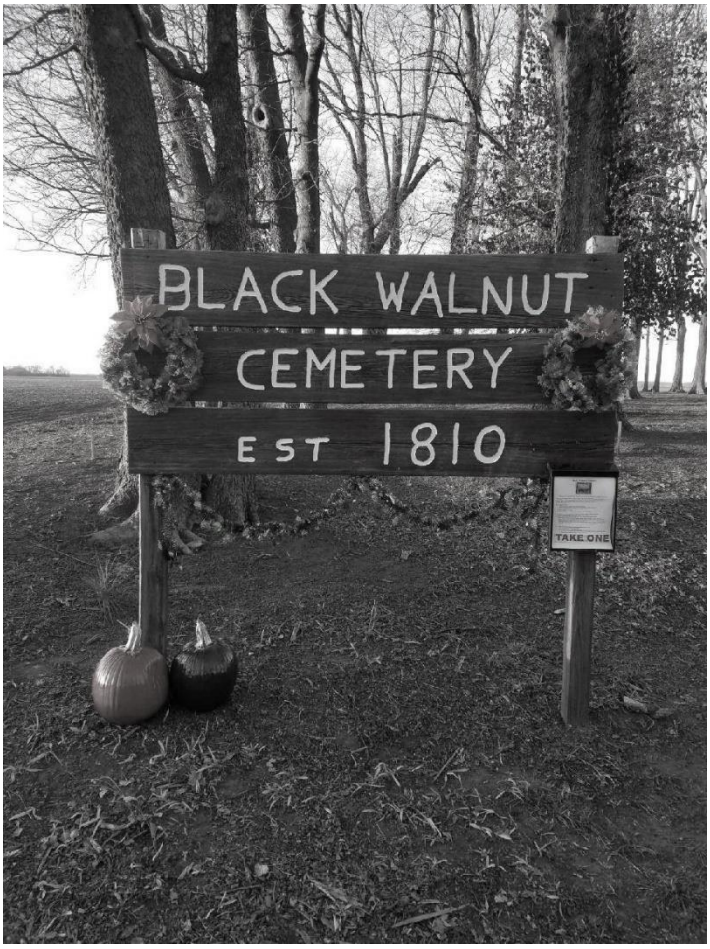
[1] Cyril Echele & Jule Pfaff. "Graveyard Slough Cemetery", *Robbins File.* St. Charles County Historical Society. St. Charles, Missouri.

[2] "Robbins Family Genealogy Forum", Genealogy.com October 7, 2002.

[3] Mary Johnson McElhiney. *Genealogical Records: Inscriptions Personally Transcribed from the Tombstones in Old Family Burying Grounds and in the Public Cemeteries in St. Charles, Montgomery, Warren, Lincoln and St. Louis Counties, Missouri*. 1970. Kathryn M. Linnemann Public Library. St. Charles City-County Library, St. Charles, Missouri.

[4] "Robbins to Robbins and Trustees or Church Wardens in the township of Portage des Sioux," *Deed Record Y, 1850-1851*, Page 297. St. Charles County Courthouse, St. Charles, Missouri.

In 2019 several cousins from Kansas and California, descendants of Moses and Abigail Cook Robins, met in St. Charles, Missouri, to discuss how to restore the cemetery after years of neglect. As shown in the photo from May 2020, the cemetery was overgrown with brush and, because it was isolated in a rural area of the county, subject to vandalism and periodic flooding--1844, 1871, 1903, 1906, 1993-- just to name a few years.



View in Late Fall 2020

Locals recalled several removals after the particularly damaging flood of 1903. Wilhelm Kluesner's remains were moved to Oak Grove Cemetery in St. Charles after his grave was disturbed by flood waters. In the Samuel Batchelor and Samuel Batchelor, Jr., Oak Grove records, the phrase "Removed from Black Walnut Cemetery 15 Jan 1909"[5] was inserted. The force of floodwaters can and does move soil and topple gravestones. Neglect makes these changes more permanent. When Lucille Wiechens, Louis Launer and Carrol Geerling visited the cemetery on February 10, 1987, they used "*neglected* and *extremely overgrown"* to describe its condition.[6]

After consulting with local interested persons, the Kansas and California cousins formed the Black Walnut Cemetery Restoration Project. They sought out, interviewed, and then asked Jerry Prouhet, an area resident with interest and expertise in cemetery restoration, to clear the land to identify gravesites. They also set up a page on Facebook—Black Walnut Cemetery Restoration Project—and created a website—www.blackwalnutcemetery.com. The board was made official. Officers were named; by-laws were written; a bank accounted was opened Then the board voted on a plan by identifying projects for restoration. They were:

- Locate all gravestones

[5] Lucille Wiechens and Carrol Geerling. *Cemeteries of St. Charles County Missouri: Information from gravestones*, Volume 5, 1988. St. Charles County Historical Society Library. St. Charles, Missouri.

[6] Carroll Geerling & Lucille Wittenborn Wiechens. *Cemeteries of St. Charles County Missouri, Volume 2: Information from cemetery registers & gravestones*. Bridgeton, MO: Lineage Press, 1987.

- Clean, restore and reset gravestones
- Develop family trees for each family buried
- Create signage to identify families buried and their histories
- Design and commission a monument to those for whom there are no gravestones
- Create a reflection area with stone or wood benches
- Research and publish a history of the Black Walnut Cemetery
- Raise money through grants and individuals for projects
- Develop a plan for long-term maintenance

The Volunteer Coordinator, Dorris Keeven-Franke, recruited a team to work under the direction of Jerry on the first workday, Sunday, May 24, 2020. Clearing the underbrush was their first job. Jerry showed the team how to systematically clear the ground of brush and other debris. Clearing meant cutting and then burning. The team met weekly through July 3rd when Jerry concluded the cemetery was cleared sufficiently so that they could begin probing for gravestones. The team had observed as they removed the underbrush that while some stones remained upright, others, most likely, were buried.

Probing for buried gravestones is a systematic process. The team first sinks the steel T-handle probes about 12 inches deep at intervals of 6 inches to outline the edges of the gravestone so that the delicate unearthing can begin, a process which can take as much as an hour.

Probing for Buried Tombstones

On the first day of probing, the team's results were immediate. They found and excavated the gravestone of Charles Rollin Spencer. It was in excellent condition.

Finding Charles' tombstone was a reminder of the cemetery's history. After the 1826 deed transfer for the cemetery, the Robbins family continued to bury some of its dead in Black Walnut—Abigail Cook Robins, d. 1829; Moses Brintnal Robbins, d. 1840; Mary Best Robbins, d. 1845. As late as 1875, Louisa Ann Robbins Mittalbarger, daughter of Moses Brintnal and Mary Best Robbins, lived on the property. During those years, local families also buried their dead in

Black Walnut. Case in point is the grave of Charles Rollin Spencer. The following surnames are linked to the cemetery:

Bacon, Baker, Bassett/Overstreet/Timberlake, Bemis, Bonds, Cornforth, Engelbrecht, Field/Dwiggins, Gaiter/Cunningham/Spencer, Garvin/Mallerson, Grace, Hoddle, Jameson/Harris, Jefferson, Johnson/Best, Keene/Havener, Kempf, Kirchdoerffer/Herle, Kluesener, Kuhn/Kunz, Kuntz, Long, Major, McKenzie, Meier, Meyer, Millering, Mittalbarger, Mudd, Murray, O'Flaherty, Pfeiffer, Prinster/Mauzy, Robbins, Deney, Stonebraker, Winger/Long/Pujol, Steinkamp, Walker

The team also discovered gravestones for family members who were unknown to our family historians. For example, the stone of Marchal, son of Geo. W. and S.K. Mittalbarger, revealed a previously unknown third son for this couple. With additional workdays into October, the team found numerous other gravestones and excavated them as well.

Tombstone--Marchal Mittalbargar

Tombstone--Charles Rollin Spencer

The most extensive project of the fall was raising money to thin large trees that had overshadowed the cemetery. The board established a GoFundMe account where relatives of those buried in the cemetery and St. Charles' residents who were interested in the project contributed so that in December a local tree service cut down and hauled away several large trees.

Black Walnut Cemetery is returning to its purpose—a memorial to those first settlers in

the Black Walnut section of Portage des Sioux. To have it be inviting once again rather than scary is the ultimate measure of the success of this project.

For additional information:
On Facebook-- Black Walnut Cemetery Restoration Project
Website— www.blackwalnutcemetery.com

December 2020 Tree Removal