Graves at Sweet Olive Cemetery lie in disrepair. While many graves are well-kept, others are cracked, sunken or hidden by weeds and debris.

**Oldest black cemetery suffering from neglect**

Lack of respect for history, short funds cited

*By J. TAYLOR RUSHING*

The oldest black cemetery in Baton Rouge greets visitors with two signs on either side of its main entrance on South 22nd Street.

On the right hangs an elegant stone sign inscribed with the words “Sweet Olive Cemetery, circa 1850.”

On the left stands a short wooden post with a typewritten note: “We need money for improvements.” Underneath the sign sits a pile of trash and leaves sprinkled with beer bottles.

It is a despairing but fitting welcome to Sweet Olive Cemetery, a quiet square of land that is home both to simple acts of respect and remarkable examples of neglect.

There is trash scattered throughout the cemetery — lots of it. Glass, aluminum and plastic bottles litter the aisles, and a shopping cart lies in a ditch near a mattress, a box spring and two tires.

Some graves at Sweet Olive are topped with fresh flowers, and others sport fresh paint and expensive markers. Some have stones with hand-carved letters, and some have tile mosaics.

But many graves are crowded, cracked, decayed, badly sunken or unmarked. Even more are hidden by weeds that have grown shoulder-high in the cemetery’s corners.

“The oldest African-American cemetery in our city should not be neglected like this,” said John Carpenter of the Mid City Redevelopment Alliance, which is working behind the scenes to help the cemetery.

“The sky should be the limit when you’re starting as low as this,” Carpenter said. “And the way to drum up interest is to show how important this cemetery is to the larger community.”

Sweet Olive was the first cemetery in Baton Rouge incorporated for use by black residents. According to the Foundation for Historical Louisiana, the cemetery is believed to be more than 200 years old. The 5.5-acre cemetery is bordered by South 22nd Street, North Boulevard, Braxton Street and a roadway that splits Sweet Olive Cemetery at America and South 22nd streets is bordered by a ditch that contains debris including this mattress, box spring and liquor bottle.

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Louisiana Avenue.

It is the final resting place of many of Baton Rouge's prominent black residents and leaders. Buried here are The Rev. Washington Monroe Taylor, a former pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church; Wesley Ringgold, a prominent black businessman; Mr. and Mrs. R.V. Wills and Mr. and Mrs. Louis Johnson, all well-known community leaders, as well as veterans of World War II and the Korean War.

The graves of Ada C. Pollock and Frank C. Blundon, who founded the Blundon Orphanage, are also here. The orphanage schooled black children in Baton Rouge for decades starting in the late 1800s.

Pollock's inscribed grave at Sweet Olive reads: "This tablet was erected by the colored people of Baton Rouge as a tribute of respect to the 29 years of untiring service that she has given them."

No one knows how many people are buried in the cemetery. Early burials weren't recorded, and many bodies were buried on top of each other. Records at the state Cemetery Board, which wasn't established until 1975, show there were 61 burials in 1984 but only 19 in 1996, 11 in 1997, 13 in 1998 and eight in 1999.

Records of Sweet Olive begin in 1898, when it was incorporated for use by black residents and maintained by benevolent societies of Mount Pleasant Baptist Church and First African Baptist Church.

The societies maintained the cemetery until the 1970s, when the nonprofit Sweet Olive Cemetery Association took over. The association was incorporated and registered with the Secretary of State's office in 1975.

Unlike National Cemetery, which is owned by the federal government, or Magnolia Cemetery, which is owned by the city-parish, Sweet Olive Cemetery is still owned and managed by a private, nonprofit association.

The association's president, Fred Mattox of Baton Rouge, started the group after noticing the neglect. He and his wife removed weeds, cleared trees and won federal funds to build the cemetery's brick-and-iron fence.

But today, Matthews, 94, said the cemetery board can't keep up the fight.

"It's an up-and-down thing," he said. "We've been trying to do something since as long as I can remember. People have to come out when they want to clean the graves."

Although plenty of volunteer clean-ups have been held over the years, Matthews said the problem is that the efforts aren't ongoing. There is no income from burial fees, which are $125 per burial, since the cemetery is already overcrowded. Matthews said Sweet Olive's last burial was this past March.

"The board has said the board tried unsuccessfully to solicit donations from relatives with family members buried in the cemetery. A fund drive in 1975 gathered $1,700, but it was only $7,000 of $35,000 people, he said, but the past November a similar effort raised less than $500.

Board member Geraldine Brown, who has a grandmother and great-grandmother buried in the cemetery, said the association has done all it can.

"I just seems almost hopeless, and that's a terrible feeling," she said. "I'm a person who basically has hope. Mr. Matthews has struggled and the board has too. But he's been able to get it cleaned up on occasion, but there's never any long-term help."

This past January the Mid City Redevelopment Agency stepped in, meeting with the board and offering a partnership to raise funds and draft labor.

Carpenter, the alliance's resource development manager, said Mid City officials have approached LSU, the Capital Transportation Corporation and the city-parish Department of Public Works about the cemetery.

Specifically, LSU professors have been asked for help in developing a master plan for the cemetery's long-term design and care, while CTG officials have been asked to apply for grants that might help in revitalizing the area. And city-parish officials have been approached about possibly helping move houses bordering Sweet Olive, with a black sculpture or exhibit built in their place.

"We stand by what we've pledged as a civic organization," Carpenter said. "This is important and we don't have all the answers, so we need to talk to people and that's what we've done."

Baton Rouge residents who have family members at Sweet Olive say they feel both sad and helpless about the cemetery's condition.

"I'm in charge, I don't feel good about it, but I don't have any alternative," said James Brooks, who cleaned up the cemetery in the 1960s after his father and mother were buried there. "I would do 100 percent behind any organization that could do something."

Brooks' son, Tyrone, trims the grass and helps in the cemetery and remembers cleaning up Sweet Olive Cemetery with his father.

"It's like no-man's land now," he said. "I used to see it go to ruin, and I'd be glad to be part of any substantial cleanup effort."

Civic officials acknowledge the problem with cleaning up Sweet Olive is in keeping the efforts ongoing.

"We've had meetings, and we've attended meetings," Carpenter said. "But before long it looks like it did the year before."" said Elizabeth "Boo" Thomas, executive director of Plan Baton Rouge. "It's a very depressing thing."

"Volunteers might come once, and maybe they'll come a second time, but then they'll move on to something different. That's just the way it is. And we're not going to make any group or source of funds to keep it up. The city won't do it because it's a private cemetery, and the state won't do it because it's not a national cemetery."

Many believe part of the problem lies with residents who don't seem to care or know that they have family or friends buried in Sweet Olive Cemetery.

Trudy Bell, executive director of Serve! Baton Rouge, remembers a listless response when officials organized a 1998 clean-up and tried to find residents who had family members buried at Sweet Olive.

"Mattison and I went and we found some graves that went back to the 1800s," she said. "It was a history lesson. But what we didn't find was the people who had loved ones in that cemetery. We contacted churches to solicit family members, and we didn't get a wholehearted response."

"I know one man who came from out-of-town to paint his family's tomb. He brought his own tools and paints; he felt that strongly about it."

"It seems to me people understand who is responsible for the cemetery's upkeep, " she said. "I think they just assumed it would be kept up by some entity," she said.

"As they drive by and see it's not being kept up, it seems as though they should take responsibility themselves. But that's not happening."

Metro Councilman W.T. Winfield, who says he probably has ancestors buried in Sweet Olive, said a civic organization should take over the cemetery.

"The cemetery is nowhere near the condition it should be for a number of reasons, but naturally the age-old reason is money," Winfield said.

"They need to have it taken over by some organization that has Baton Rouge as its core interest, for some sort of long-lasting arrangement. That's what I see. Right now there is no guarantee of any kind of control or maintenance."

Brown said she hopes residents who have family members buried in Sweet Olive would now be willing to make a difference. But she also wonders if it's too late to teach today's young adults about protecting the past. "It's a different mentality now," she said. "This generation doesn't have the same caring attitude toward the people (buried there), and they probably don't even know who's there."