Throughout the cemetery are simple gravestones placed by grieving family members.

Fred C. Matthews Jr. tends to the grave of the Rev. Washington Monroe Taylor, one of the state’s most prominent African Baptist ministers. Taylor served as pastor of Mount Zion First Baptist Church at the beginning of the 20th century.

Resting in Peace

Group has worked for years to preserve historic Sweet Olive Cemetery, BR’s oldest black cemetery

By CAROL ANNE BLITZER

Tracked away in a quiet section of South 22nd Street between North Boulevard and Louisiana Avenue is what should be a treasure trove of Black history. Sweet Olive Cemetery, the oldest black cemetery in Baton Rouge, is the final resting place of thousands of black citizens, many from ordinary walks of life as well as others who achieved great prominence in their community. To members of the black community, especially those whose roots in the area go back generations, Sweet Olive is sacred ground. The majority is that so much of the history of Sweet Olive and those buried there is lost forever. Nobody knows how Sweet Olive got its name, nor do anyone knows for sure where the names of most of the people buried there. No one really knows how old the cemetery is, nor how many of the graves are unmarked.

A sign at the front dates it to around 1850. Official records begin in 1868, when two benevolent societies began ownership and maintenance of the property. However, family members of those buried there say that the cemetery is more than 200 years old.

A century ago, the location of Sweet Olive was on the outskirts of Baton Rouge.

Now it is in the heart of Mid-City. In the days of slavery blacks who lived and worked on plantations were generally buried in plantation graveyards. After the Civil War, most of the old graveyards were abandoned. Black churches set up benevolent societies to care for the sick and needy and to aid families in times of death.

Who originally established Sweet Olive is not known. However, records indicate that two benevolent societies, the Society of Sons and Daughters of Mount Zion Baptist Church and the Society of the First African Baptist Church, owned and maintained the cemetery from 1868 until 1912, when the cemetery property was divided between the two societies.

For as long as anyone can remember, Sweet Olive has looked very much like a New Orleans cemetery. The majority of the graves are concrete vaults about 2 feet high. However, these vaults are not the earliest graves. They actually cover the earliest graves. In the early years, we were burying 6 feet in the ground—in wood coffins,” said 95-year-old Fred C. Matthews Jr., president of the Sweet Olive Cemetery Association, which has oversaw the

ABOVE: Fred C. Matthews Jr., Edna Jordan Smith, Joanna Dillon and W.T. Winfield, from left, have worked for years to try to preserve the Historic Sweet Olive Cemetery.

RIGHT: The black community so appreciated the work of Ada Catharine Pollock, the white Baptist who, with her husband, founded the Brandon Home for poor black children, that black community leaders asked her family in New York to allow her to be buried at Sweet Olive.
The original graves generally had no headstones, and as other family members died, their remains were buried on top of those already buried. As a result, the earliest graves in Sweet Olive were almost all unmarked.

"Eighty-five percent of the graves have no headstones, no kind of marker," Matthews said.

By the early 1970s, the two burial societies, which still owned the cemetery, no longer had the financial means to maintain it. The Negro Safety Association at Exxon Refinery assisted the societies for a while, and the city gave what help it could.

The old cemetery was in terrible condition. Filled with waist-high weeds, fallen trees, trash and crumbling walls. The cemetery was literally abandoned," Matthews said. "That's when we came in."

Matthews and his late wife, Vivian, used to pass the cemetery every day. Vivian Matthews was greatly bothered by the condition of the cemetery. "She'd say it's a disgrace in the heart of Baton Rouge with all these churches here to have this cemetery looking like this," Matthews said.

He told his wife, "They ought to do something about that."

"That's when Vivian Matthews turned to her husband and said, 'We're part of the problem.'"

The Matthews with the help of a few friends started collecting names and addresses of families who had relatives buried in the cemetery. They collected 240 names in three days, Matthews said.

They spread the word that they were trying to help improve the cemetery. "It was coming up all around. We had lots of help," Matthews said. That was in 1973.

Family members came to the Matthews in order to get in for the holidays, "People brought their boxes and rakes just to clean up around the graves," he said. "People were hungry and needed to know somebody was doing something about the cemetery."

In 1974, the Matthews organized the Sweet Olive Cemetery Association, a private, non-profit organization to manage the old cemetery. Fred C. Matthews Jr. became the association president.

Local attorney Murphy Bell and Matthews enlisted the aid of City Councilmen Joe Delait, Wilt Winfield and Jewell Newman to assist them in obtaining community development funds from the federal government. One of the first improvements was a brick and iron fence around the cemetery.

"When the surveyors came out before they put the fence up, they discovered that the vaults extended 2 to 2 1/2 feet beyond the property line," Matthews said. "Weell Bell and Matthews didn't know how they were going to handle this problem. They could not find the relatives of those people whose graves were not on actual cemetery property."

Mayur W.W. Dumas and Ray Burgess, director of public works for the city parish, came to the rescue of the association. "Mr. Dumas and Mr. Burgess got together and said to forget it. They dedicated the necessary footage to the cemetery," Matthews said. "You don't forget those kinds of things."

One important fact is that through Sweet Olive contains the graves of a veritable who's who in the city. Of the first part of the last century and one of the most famous graves in the cemetery is that of a prominent white woman.

That woman, Ada Catharine Pollock, came to Baton Rouge with her husband, Frank C. Pollock, in 1887 to establish an orphanage and school for "poor colored children," Matthews said. The Blundon, both New York, Baptist volunteers, established Blundon Home.

"She meant everything to the black people," Matthews said. "When she died in 1917, the black leadership requested her family to allow them to bury her in this cemetery."

Matthews said, "At this lady, a 4-by-8-foot marble slab was placed on her grave with a beautiful and well-worded inscription."

Written on the marble slab is "This tablet was created by the owners of Baton Rouge as a tribute of respect to the twenty-nine years of unselfish service that she has given to them."

Another important grave is that of Rev. Washington Monroe Taylor, who served as pastor of Mount Zion First Baptist Church for about 30 years from the beginning of the 20th century. Taylor was highly regarded in the African Baptist community and served as president of the local district African Baptist churches, president of the state convention and vice president of the national convention.

Taylor's son, the Rev. Gardner C. Taylor, is a prominent Baptist minister in New York, is an honorary member of the Sweet Olive Cemetery Association board.

Another prominent citizens buried at Sweet Olive include I.M. Johnson, who owned the Majestic Funeral Home and an insurance company, and his wife, businessman Wesley Ringleid."

"And prominent, too, are the members who serve on the cemetery board," Matthews said. "Board member Johnn Dillen, long life member of the city council, 'if you saw two people on the street and asked if they were friends of the families,' she said. She recalls how busy the graves that are frequently washed up to the surface and were visible on the property."

Evelyn Jordan Smith, a librarian and professor of journalism, serves as cemetery historian. She has numerous relatives in the cemetery, including two great-grandmothers. "Both were in bondage," Smith said.

District 10 Councilwoman Lori Burgess, a member of the advisory committee, also has numerous ancestors buried at Sweet Olive including her great-grandparents, Simon and Georgiana Coax.


Also serving on the advisory committee are Geraldine Brown, Stan Douglas, Ray Davis, Patricia Smith and William Thomas. Preston George Sr. and William J.ulosco, cardiologist, and Bank of America legal counsel.

In 1996, the Andrew Birt Baton Rouge, trees were blown down all through the cemetery and property damage. "That would have cost $50,000 or $70,000," Matthews said.

In recent years, numerous organizations have assisted the association in maintaining the property. Churches and local citizens of all faiths have assisted including members of St. Joseph Episcopal Church, Holy Family and St. Frances Xavier Catholic churches; Magnolia, St. Joseph, Shady Grove and Evening Star Baptist churches; and the Synagogue.

"On Sundays John Johnson frequently requires work in Sweet Olive when he imposes sentences of volunteers," Matthews said. "He has worked with the people and has even paid for the children who come with their guardians."

Seymour, about 10 years ago, Stan Douglas, a member of the Southeast Kiwanis Club, wrote an article in The Advocate about Sweet Olive and volunteered the services of his club. They cut the grass and do other cleanup chores on a regular basis.

First Lady Alice Foster has been instrumental in getting inmates from the Women's Correctional Institution to regularly help clean the cemetery.

Recently 60 young people and adults from Trinity Lutheran Church helped paint some of the "vats. They used about 100 gallons of paint, Smith said.

In the last couple of years the Mid-City Civic Council has taken an active role in helping find ways to permanently maintain the cemetery.

"We realized we were getting older. There was no more work to do," Dillen said. "We needed someone to help us with the cemetery."

At the same time we are trying to rebuild the housing in Mid City, we thought it was important to work with the Sweet Olive board," said Perry Franklin, Mid City executional director. "We think it's important to keep history alive."

Lori Burgess, Franklin and Winfield represent the younger generation interested in the history of the cemetery.

We look at these prominent citizens who have been buried here at Sweet Olive for so long, and we realize that we need to step forward to join with that group," Franklin said.

The Mid-City Redevelopment Agency recently formed the Mid-City Cemetery Association with representatives from the five historic mid-city cemeteries. St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery, Magnolia Cemetery, the Jewish Cemetery, Magnolia Cemetery, and Sweet Olive Cemetery. The group has been meeting to see how best to preserve these important historic landmarks.

Matthews continues to serve as president of the Mid-City Cemetery Association as he has since its founding. He keeps a file on all those who have helped in the cemetery over the years.

"When the history of Sweet Olive is written, it will be recorded in that sacred and memorable document," he said.

These days, there's only an occasional funerary at Sweet Olive. There's just not enough room.

"Sometimes a woman might want to be buried under her husband," Winfield said, "and a few families have asked...

"Every blue moon or so we have a burial," Smith said.

Advocate file photo by Travis Spradling Members of the City Council helped the Sweet Olive Cemetery Association get federal funds for a brick and iron fence, which was built in 1978.

Advocate staff photo by Travis Spradling