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Preserving history - Volunteers don't let rain stand in way of cleanup of city cemetery



Kirsten Hixson and Shelby Moser scrub a headstone at Oak Hill Cemetery on Saturday morning. (Dave Boyd / Johnson City Press)

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There is a marked improvement this weekend in the appearance of the city's oldest cemetery.

A large part of that improvement came from some of the area's youngest volunteers.

Several members of three area Churches of Jesus Christ of Latter-day



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Saints gave their time and energy to help in the communitywide cleanup of Oak Hill Cemetery, along with several other volunteers and city employees Saturday morning.

Kurt Fagerburt and his family, members of one of the churches, said it was important to preserve such a monument to history.

“It’s something that needed to be done,” he said as his small children furiously scrubbed an old tombstone. “And it’s an opportunity for us to get out and help people. I mean, it’s something of historic significance.”

The cemetery, located just off West State of Franklin Road, is the final resting place of Johnson City’s founder Henry Johnson; the designer of Tennessee’s state flag, LeRoy Reeves; and numerous Civil War veterans.

In total, there were about 50 volunteers who showed up Saturday morning. Betty Seaton Williams, organizer of Oak Hill Cemetery Friends and Volunteers, said she was pleased with the response and credited it to good media coverage, though she thought the rainy weather lowered participation in the cleanup.

Most of the cleanup Saturday focused on landscaping that had been neglected for years.

“We’re just working in the rain,” Williams said. “We’re just happy with what’s going on. It’s going great, going well. It would have done better without the rain.”

Children hauled wheelbarrows full of sod taken from around the bases of tombstones so they could be re-situated, men ran string trimmers and little kids washed off the old tombstones, some of which had broken off their pedestals and fallen onto the ground.

“A lot of children ... are working, they’re scrubbing stones,” said Barbara Sanders Thomas, who also helped found Oak Hill Cemetery Friends and Volunteers.

Williams said she would like to see lighting installed in the cemetery, a resurfacing of the road that divides the plot of land and is looking for donations to place an antique-style wrought iron gate at the graveyard’s entrance.

She said the Mountain Home Association plans to plant a small flower garden near the cemetery.

Christal Neumann, 15, and a member of the Latter-day Saints church in Kingsport, said she jumped at the chance to help restore the cemetery.

“I thought it would be fun to help out, to make the grave sites look better and nicer for the families who have to visit them (graves) so it’s not always a mess,” Neumann said.

She said her church encouraged its congregation to help clean the

cemetery.

“They told us on Sunday and I wanted to do it, so I made sure I got to come,” she said.

Her friend, Kelsey Hubmann, said she was proud to see the difference in the cemetery’s appearance.

“I think the way it looked before we got here — everything grown up over the grave sites ... I think it looks much nicer now,” Hubmann said.

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