Lohmann: New life for an old cemetery
Posted: Sunday, August 28, 2016 10:30 pm

There was a time when the preferred final resting place for the important and influential of Richmond — as well as lots of others — was Shockoe Hill Cemetery.

But not lately.

The city-owned cemetery, founded in 1822, was an early attempt to bring order to the burial business in a city that until then had relied on churchyards and similarly small spaces for graveyards. In a growing city, that was an unsustainable plan.

Shockoe Hill, known as the “burying ground” at the outset, began with 4 acres near the intersection of what is now 4th and Hospital streets and what was then the outskirts of downtown. It was adjacent to the Hebrew Cemetery, a free black and slave burial ground was nearby, and the alms house was next door. Later, Shockoe Hill expanded to almost 13 acres in a park-like setting that followed a trend of such municipal cemeteries in emerging East Coast cities.

Notables buried at Shockoe Hill include John Marshall, Peter Francisco, John Wickham, Elizabeth Van Lew, John and Frances Allan (who raised Edgar Allan Poe), as well as physicians, politicians and soldiers from the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812 and the Civil War — Union and Confederate. Even a few of my relatives are buried there,
including Frederick W.E. Lohmann, a German immigrant who worked with Van Lew, who led an underground network of Union spies during the Civil War.

(It should be noted that, as per the times, Shockoe Hill was segregated by race. As Jeffry Burden, past president of the Friends of Shockoe Hill Cemetery, put it, “You could be just about anything else — Jewish, immigrant, poor — but not black.” Burden said he knows of at least two exceptions of slaves/servants whose remains were moved to family plots in Shockoe Hill after their employer families petitioned the city council for a variance to the segregation ordinance.)

Shockoe Hill’s popularity — and space — eventually waned and by later in the 1800s it was bypassed for newer cemeteries such as Oakwood, Riverview and Hollywood that offered more acreage and greater prestige and became the favored landing spots on the way to eternity.

Upward of 30,000 people are buried within the brick walls of the cemetery, but the most recent burial was in 2003, in a previously acquired family section. No one can remember the last time the city sold a lot in the cemetery, though Burden estimates it was around 1900.

So, the cemetery has been little more than a historical artifact in recent decades — and a non-revenue-generating one at that.

But that’s about to change.

Utilizing a state law that allows cemetery owners to reclaim unused sites after 50 years, the city of Richmond is beginning to reclaim lots of the cemetery that may have been sold almost two centuries ago but never used for burials. It plans to resell them, which, in a certain way, will bring the cemetery back to life.

“We don’t have a revenue stream at the cemetery at the present time,” said James B. Laidler, the city’s cemetery operations division manager. “This is hopefully going to bring some revenues to help us with the cost of maintaining it.”

The first step is the acquisition of a columbarium, with 72 niches for cremated remains, and placing it on an unused lot in the central part of the cemetery, Laidler said. The reasoning? Increasing numbers of Virginians are choosing cremation, Laidler said, and it’s a more economically efficient use of space.

The proposal is working its way through the city’s capital expenditure approval process. Laidler hopes the niches will be available for sale by the end of the year. The niches would be priced from $1,595 to $1,995.

Burden said he hopes new sales of burial plots will renew interest in the cemetery. He’s been involved at Shockoe Hill since the Friends of Shockoe Hill started in 2006, helping with weeding, watering and fixing fallen grave markers, as well as spreading the story of the cemetery.

“I’m a student of history anyway,” said Burden, an attorney who also is past commander-in-chief of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, a
national organization composed of descendants of officers who served in the U.S. military during the Civil War.

“Since I was a small boy — one of those weird things — I’ve enjoyed visiting cemeteries. The very evident history and the stories suggested by the cemeteries just fascinated me.”

Besides upkeep the city can’t get to, the friends group sponsors historical tours, installs markers at the unmarked graves of soldiers, and holds special events such as the dedication of a marker commemorating the victims of a munitions facility explosion on Brown’s Island in March 1863.

That explosion claimed the lives of 47 workers, most of whom were girls younger than 17. Fourteen were buried at Shockoe Hill.

The cemetery is on the Civil War Trails driving tour, and Burden hopes the planned redevelopment of neighboring Gilpin Court will help spark a revival in this part of town that also will bring attention to Shockoe Hill.

A self-sustaining cemetery — revenue-wise, with the new sale of burial spaces — would certainly help the cause. He said the partnership between the grass-roots friends group and the city is a success story.

“We’re on the road to not only maintaining but improving it,” Burden said. “Some day, when this area north of the interstate sort of rejoins the full life of the city, the cemetery’s going to be in good shape and it’s going to be an attraction, a place for people to enjoy and reflect and visit and study.

“This is one of the most historic cemeteries in the country, even if it’s not often thought of that way.”

wohmann@timesdispatch.com
(804) 649-6639
Posted in Bill Lohmann, Column on Sunday, August 28, 2016 10:30 pm