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259 Family's roots survive the years

*Cemetery is still,
but history sings out*

BY JAMIE C. RUFF

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER.

BUCKINGHAM — Even amid the stillness of the small cemetery, Renee Ingram's family history resounds around her.

The more than 30 graves, marked with slate head and footstones, are believed to be the resting place of her ancestors — at least four generations of the Stanton Family, one of the few free black families in the county before the Civil War.

Dedicated yesterday

The cemetery, in northeastern Buckingham County off state Route 677, is the first black family-owned cemetery in the state to be placed on the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places. A formal dedication ceremony was held yesterday.

In 1853, Nancy Stanton — Ingram's great-great-grandmother — bought 46.5 acres of land in Buckingham. She was the first free black to own land in the region. She is also believed to have been the first person buried in the cemetery later that year.

Additional research revealed the names and professions of many family members. Those discoveries, Ingram said, changed the way she looks at herself.

Spiritual feeling

"I have roots. I have a place in history, as well as my ancestors," she said. "It's a spiritual feeling that I have. It's an emotional feeling that I have. I feel like it's another part of me being unfolded."

Hugh C. Miller, director of the Department of Historic Resources, said Ingram's family tree also bore

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History resounds in family cemetery

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historic fruit.

"The Stanton family cemetery is an important link between the past and the future, not only for the Stanton family, but for all Virginians, as we learn more about free black families and the roles they played in shaping the commonwealth and the nation," he said. "One can say that time has laid its hands on this place."

Forgotten locations

Indeed, the national register report, based largely on Ingram's research, notes that, while many black cemeteries may have been developed in rural Virginia, "the locations of many have been forgotten as African-American populations have moved out of state or to more urban areas. This cemetery is even more significant as an example of an antebellum African-American cemetery established not on a plantation but by free blacks on their own land."

Eventually, the family would expand its holdings to a 90.24-acre tract. While no member of the family has lived on the land since 1939, the Stanton family has retained ownership. This year they are celebrating the 140th year the land has been in the family.

Ingram's mother, Edith M. Stanton Ingram, 72, is administrator of the estate.

Incomplete census records showed only 139 free blacks living in Buckingham County before the Civil War, compared with 11,441 slaves. Only 35 percent of the free blacks rented or owned land, while the remainder worked as servants or manual laborers.

Raised in New England, Renee Ingram learned little about black history in school, except for slavery and a few famous names. Her ties to the Buckingham farmland were tenuous.

But, she took an interest in her family's genealogy. In August 1990, she and a cousin presented a documentary at a family reunion. The presentation went back two generations and talked about slavery.

Reunion revelation

The reunion, held in Buckingham, included a tour of the old homestead and the family cemetery.

Until they toured the cemetery, the Stanton descendants did not realize how many of their ancestors lay buried there.

"The elders were under the impression that only a few family members were buried there," Renee Ingram said.

Instead, they found markers of slate from the local quarries, and three World War I tombstones placed by the federal government.

"We were so impressed with this fantastic discovery that my immediate family suggested we should do something to preserve this beautiful cemetery," she said.

The discovery only spurred In-

gram's interest in researching the family's roots. She said she contacted the Virginia Department of Historic Resources about funds to preserve the cemetery.

The research was pushed by the announcement that nearby state Route 677 was to be expanded and paved.

Renee Ingram, a member of the Washington chapter of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, was familiar with stories of black cemeteries and other pieces of black history being destroyed by progress.

Desecrated by developers

"I know people whose family cemeteries were desecrated by a developer who came in and built a shopping center," she said. "It's horrifying what's happening."

Ingram's quest took her from files and papers in the Library of Congress and the National Archives to the records of a rural church.

Elderly family members could not remember much beyond their own generations. Ingram said her mother had long thought the land had passed through a white slavemaster.

"She had no idea it was her grandmother's, a free black woman," Ingram said.

Occasionally, Ingram's efforts were stymied. But fortune and ingenuity cleared many hurdles.

While the black church the family attended was not established until after the Civil War, Ingram was able to trace the family further through their membership in a white church. Blacks were allowed to attend the church, but could not be buried in its cemetery.

Puzzle unfolds

"It's like a puzzle," she said. "Once things unfold — and they will — you just have to use all the resources out there."

Ultimately, Ingram was able to breathe life into many of the names on the tombstones and even learn what crops had been planted in the surrounding fields.

She traced the family's history as free blacks back to 1820 and found that her ancestors included farmers, blacksmiths, carpenters, boatmen, soldiers and quarrymen.

But there are still a number of questions Ingram would like to answer.

It is not clear how Nancy Stanton's family gained freedom. Ingram said she also would like to know more about the business of her relatives who were boatmen; and the type of work done by two family members pressed into service for the Confederacy.

"It's an ongoing process. You never become an expert, but you go through the trials of unfolding your family history," she said.

"I know there is a lot to be uncovered, unfolded. I really feel like it is a family obligation. . . . It's ultimately up to us to preserve our own history."