

U.S. Colored troops honored at Allegheny Cemetery



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Looking out at the worn headstones in the military section of Allegheny Cemetery, Vietnam era vet Mike Flournoy shook his head.

“To think, 150 years ago, these men were buried in a totally integrated cemetery, yet just 40 years ago we had problems with Blacks being buried in ‘White’ cemeteries,” he said. “What happened to change that? That’s something I think sociologists might want to look at.”



Flournoy and fellow Black Vietnam era vets Sager McDill and Olson Pollard laid a wreath at the Allegheny Cemetery’s Veterans Memorial in a ceremony commemorating the service and sacrifice of United States Colored Troops during the Civil War, which began 150 years ago.

“This is really great,” said Pollard. “It’s beyond the call of duty for everyone to honor our troops of the past. And I am honored to have participated.”

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—Vietnam Vets from left: Olson Pollard, Sager McDill and Mike Flournoy prepare to lay a wreath honoring the US Colored Troops buried at Allegheny Cemetery on the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War. (Photo by J. L. Martello)

And although he didn’t speak, World War II veteran Col. George Charlton Jr., was pleased to be a guest for the ceremony. Charlton, joined on the dais by retired Senior Master Sergeant Timothy McCray, said he was just doing what he could to recognize these soldiers.

“I was in the 10th U.S. Cavalry, so I’m a Buffalo Soldier and there’s only about three of us left around here,” he said. “Mostly I’m just working to help raise funds for the World War II Veteran’s Memorial, but this is important. I’m glad to be here.”

The Nov. 14 ceremony, which also featured Civil War re-enactors and representatives from the John Heinz History Center, Soldiers and Sailors Museum, and the African American Genealogical Society, is part of a multi-year effort to remember and document the contributions of African-American soldiers

during the Civil War.

As part of that effort, the History Center, the cemetery, Soldiers and Sailors and the Genealogical Society will be asking for help in documenting the lives and families of African-Americans who served in the Civil War and are buried at Allegheny Cemetery.

History Center President and CEO Andy Masich thanked cemetery director David Michner and Genealogical Society representative Marlene Bransom for identifying some of the graves of USCT soldiers.

“There are 150-200 members of the Colored Troops buried here,” he said. “We need help in mapping the plots so that others can visit these important sites.”

Historian John Brewer, who also spoke at the ceremony said there is another group of soldiers whose history is even more in jeopardy—the Confederate Negroes. Many, he said, especially those from Virginia, moved to Pittsburgh after the Civil War.

“These were free Blacks. They were miners, blacksmiths, boatwrights, carpenters, who had to make tough choices when they saw their livelihoods threatened by the war,” he said. “One, Tom Pettiford, who served with Confederate troops in North Carolina, died here in Pittsburgh in 1929. He’s probably buried out here somewhere, as are probably hundreds more, and that’s just in this cemetery. So we are here to salute the Black soldiers of the North and South and ask that all their names not be lost to history.”

Sam Black, curator at the Heinz History Center said the ceremony was just the beginning of the overall project to learn about these soldiers, their families and where they lived.

“In 2012, the Heinz Center, along with assistance from Pitt, CMU, the National African American Museum in Ohio and Friends of Forks in The Road will open a new exhibit ‘From Slavery to Freedom’ that will tell some of their stories,” he said.

Following the wreath-laying ceremony, guests and participants were given maps, flags and names of USCT soldiers so they could mark some of the graves. Many more remain to be located, but the search will continue.

(Send comments to cmorrow@newpittsburghcourier.com.)