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Formerly forgotten graves now on path to ruins

By Jennifer Johnson
Managing Editor

U.S. Air Force veteran Prentice Broussard served America while rising to the rank of second-class airman before his death on Feb. 24, 1968. He was just 31 years old. Though no words or memorials have withstood the test of time to honor the young African-American son of Texas, someone cared enough then to ensure that Broussard's earthly vessel was entombed with all the proper markings to denote his all-too-brief life and the sacrifices he made for his country.

In the years since, a forest had been allowed to swallow the American hero's final resting place, where the soldier's grave sits rife with drug paraphernalia debris and broken glass beer bottles alongside a gas pipeline parallel to Gill Street's North End Beaumont sidewalk. Last year, The Examiner highlighted the deplorable conditions of the long-forgotten cemetery where Broussard's tombstone was overgrown with waste and refuse, mostly forgotten, and completely neglected.

Jefferson County deed documents and appraisal district mapping was inconclusive as to who even owned the plot of land where Broussard's remains rest. Some documents referenced Community Cemeteries Inc., owned in 2018 by the now late Donald and wife, Stella, Taft. Anthony Cemetery owner Raymond Chaisson, whose property is essentially co-mingled with property owned or operated by Community Cemeteries Inc., was another possibility.

Community Cemeteries Inc. Secretary/Treasurer Cindi Stevens said the owner would research who was responsible for the lot where Broussard is buried.

"I didn't know about this until today," she said in June 2018. "Now, I'm not sure what we're going to do."

In 2019, Stevens was more familiar with the plot of land.

From bad to worse

Littered with overgrown weeds and trash in 2018, Broussard's grave is worse off now than it was then. Trees knocked down by heavy machinery haphazardly lay on top of Broussard's grave and have thrown the headstone askew, the same fate befalling other nearby graves now under too much rubble to decipher their origins. Venturing further off onto the semi-cleared path made possible by the deforestation that now adorns the neglected graves, other headstones reveal similarly forgotten ancestors, like that of Private First Class Frank Bell of the Second Infantry. Bell's tombstone only denoted the day of his death – Aug. 16, 1933. Most of the graves



Prentice Broussard's headstone in 2018



Prentice Broussard's headstone in 2019

scattered in the woods where Broussard and Bell are buried beneath with unmarked sarcophagi and nothing more signifies their inhabitants.

Jefferson County Historical Commission Coordinator Linda McMahan said, though not fully inventoried, the graveyard-turned-forest where Broussard and Bell are buried likely holds the remains of soldiers and Beaumont African-Americans dating back even further than Bell's 1933 death date. According

to records of the Jefferson County Historical Society on file, the land where Broussard is buried was used as a cemetery dating back to at least 1912.

Unfortunately, due to the age of the cemetery, Texas Funeral Service Commission Legal Assistant/Public Information Officer Kathy Sparks said the state has zero oversight over the land's upkeep. As it is not a perpetual care cemetery – as most city cemeteries dating prior to 1993 – the grounds are



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As recently as 2018, new graves are being laid in next to the decaying cemetery plots of those dating back to the 1930s.

not regulated by the state funeral service commission.

But getting better?

Acknowledging that some clearing may have been done on the property where Broussard is buried, Community Cemeteries Inc.'s Stevens was hesitant to speak on the specifics.

"You're going to have to talk to Mrs. Taft about that," Stevens said when asked Nov. 19 about the current condition of Broussard's grave.

"I know where you're talking about – the wooded area," Taft said, when reached by phone. Taft said she was out of town Nov. 20, but was at least anecdotally aware of the site in question. "There's some grave spaces in there. We're in the process of seeing about all that."

Taft said that, after The Examiner's 2018 report of Broussard's neglected grave, it was determined that the property did indeed belong to Community Cemeteries.

"It will be cleared – that's all I can say right

now," she said. "We're working on it.

"I can't say for sure what the timeline is, but ... we're working on resolving that and some other issues."

Disabled American Veterans rep Bruce Lockett said his organization would like to get involved to ensure no veteran's grave is desecrated.

"It's not right for a veteran's grave to look like that, and we want to help," he said.

Vietnam veteran George Matthews, a member of the Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 292 in Beaumont, said his group would be willing to assist in cleanup efforts as well.

"I would participate in cleaning it up, but we need a lot of help out here," Matthews said. Referring to his group as "a bunch of old guys," Matthews is certain the mind is willing, but he isn't certain how physically prepared he and his cohorts are to take on the heavy lifting. His hopes are that a group effort can make the cemetery cleanup a reasonable reality. "I'd say the community should help in this. But the community may not even know about it – or care about it."

Further, he said, many people will talk a good talk, but walking the walk is much harder to endure.

"It's not about 'intention,' it's about 'attention.'"

Matthews points to other forgotten or neglected cemeteries, such as Evergreen Cemetery on Pine Street, not far from where Broussard and Bell are interred.

"It needs a lot of assistance," he said. "You have Buffalo Soldiers buried there, too.

"I'd like to see all these cemeteries cleaned up. Somebody needs to care about these sites – about these graveyards. It's all raggedy – it's shameful."



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