

Brunswick County

Cemetery, rifle pit among endangered sites

By Lee Hinnant
Staff Writer

Brunswick County's only cemetery dedicated to interring African-Americans and one of the last remaining monuments to the Great War have been recognized among the most threatened historic sites in the Cape

‘Some of the remaining family members are in their 80s and 90s. There are a lot of memories out here. To see it ignored is a shame to the community, and a shame to the work they contributed.’

Judy Gordon
Cemetery board president

Fear region.

Historic Wilmington Foundation recently named the John N. Smith Cemetery in Southport as the most endangered historic site in the area. For the second year, the Fort Caswell rifle range pit has also made the top-12 “most endangered” list.

The foundation's hope is that calling attention to the sites will raise public awareness about their value and make it easier for supporters to save and enhance them.

Located at 224 East Leonard Street, Southport's Smith Cemetery is the final resting place for noted residents including Frank Gordon, Brunswick's first black educator; Ephraim Swain, the county's first black magistrate; and “Nehi” Gore, the “Gentleman Giant” who reportedly stood

7 feet, 11 inches tall.

“The John N. Smith Cemetery in Southport is the only cemetery (that) interred African-Americans in Brunswick County,” the foundation stated in its announcement. “There is an urgent need to construct a fence around the property, restore grave markers, complete a ground penetrating radar study to identify the location of unmarked graves and place identifying markers so that new interments do not compromise existing burials.”

Judy Gordon, president of the cemetery's board of directors, said her group was working to locate unmarked graves and keep the circa-1880 site in good repair. She believes there may be “hundreds” of interments that were never marked, or marked with wooden crosses or other monuments that have not stood up to more than a century of weathering.

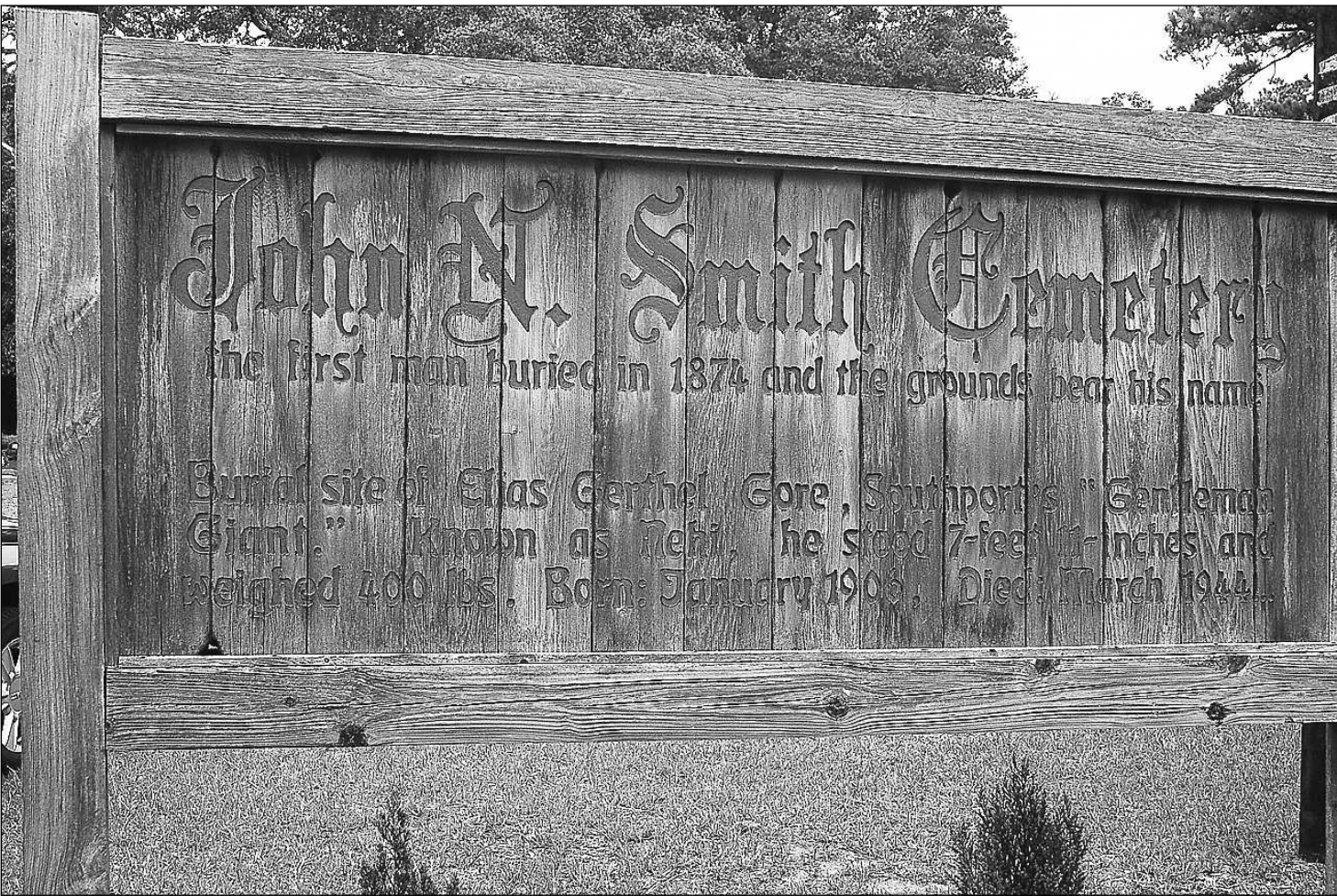
“I know a whole bunch of these people out here,” Gordon said, gesturing across the 3.5-acre rectangle started by St. James African-American Episcopal Zion Church. “Some of the remaining family members are in their 80s and 90s. There are a lot of memories out here. To see it ignored is a shame to the community, and a shame to the work they contributed.”

The cemetery is loosely controlled by five traditionally African-American churches, but ownership records are incomplete. As a result, it has been a victim of benign neglect. Board members hope to bring more order to operations of the cemetery, which is still used.

Gordon and her board are working to raise money for additional fencing and ground-penetrating radar studies to solidly identify graves. They also deal with yard waste, rocks and other debris being dumped on the historic site.

“If we don't do what we need to do now, it won't get done,” Gordon said.

The cemetery board is also working to assemble a comprehensive list of everyone interred at the Smith cemetery. More information about the effort and site, including an e-mail contact, is available at www.johnsmith-cemetery.org.



This sign marks the historic Southport cemetery located off East Leonard Street.

Caswell gem

Other volunteers at Caswell Beach continue their efforts to repair and highlight the World War I-era rifle pit, which was formerly part of the larger Fort Caswell complex.

Today, the 1918 structure stands next to Oak Island Golf Course in the Caswell Dunes subdivision. It is one of the few physical reminders of the Great War. In its day, it hosted soldiers who learned long-range marksmanship before being shipped off to fight in Europe.

The Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range held a Kentucky Derby-themed event in May that raised nearly \$2,800 for the rifle pit. Efforts to save the neglected structure started in 2011, and supporters have cleaned the pit, removed trees threatening the walls and made temporary repairs.

The friends group has about



Photos by Lee Hinnant

Eddie Davis works on a headstone at the John N. Smith Cemetery as Judy Gordon looks on.

\$5,000 and hopes to raise a total of about \$20,000 to permanently stabilize the long walls of the rifle range.

Supporters are seeking the public's contributions about fam-

ily members who served in the Great War. Interested persons are invited to send photographs and related information for the group's Wall of Honor, which is displayed at public events. The

e-mail address is ftcaswellrifle-range@gmail.com.

More information about the range and the restoration effort is available at www.caswellrifle-range.com.



The Fort Caswell rifle pit needs repairs to the main passageway wall.