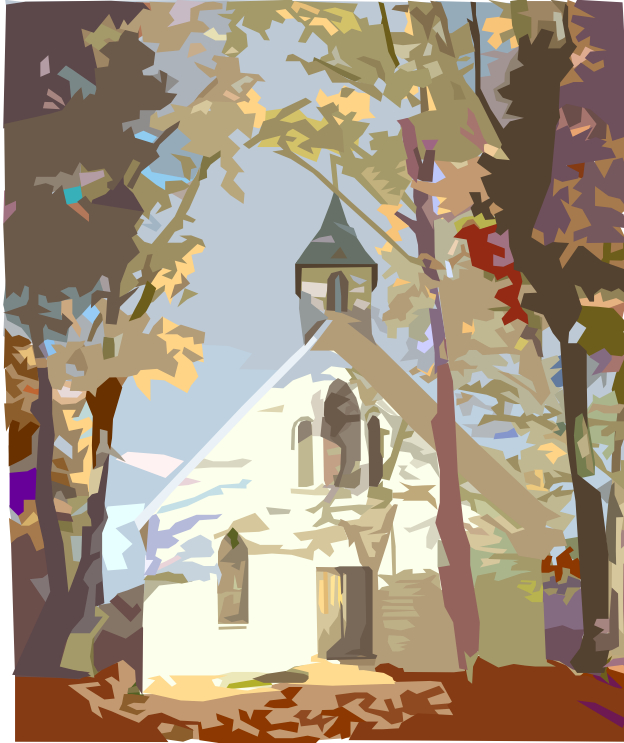


# Dignity and Respect



By Seth Brookes

It all started in a field.

I don't remember why I out in this field, probably just clearing my head, but the events of that weekend will never leave my memory.

I was just wondering around, staring at the sky, when I hit something with my foot and face-planted into the dirt.

"What the hell?" I asked myself. Rolling over and dusting myself off, I looked around to see what had caused my fall.

A red rock sticking out of the ground. "Why would anyone bury a rock like that?" I wondered. Then I saw another, sticking up the same way, just a few feet to the left. And another to the right.

I scrambled to my feet and tripped again. There was another one behind. Suddenly, it dawned on me where I was.

This was an abandoned cemetery.

"Holy shit," I said aloud. "I never knew this was here. I wonder how old it is."

After about 30 minutes of looking around, I located 40 gravesites, all marked with red rock, but non names or dates on any of them.

I sat under the lone tree in that field for about an hour, pondering what I had just discovered. "I'll bet nobody even knows this place is here. Is tat right? What about these people's families?"

Suddenly, it hit me. I would restore this place. Return it to it's proper status and show it's "patrons" the respect the deserved.

I walked home feeling good about what I had decided to do and went to bed early that night, ready to get an early start on my new weekend project.

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The next morning, I headed out at first light. I loaded up my dad's little riding lawn mower and trailer with a weedeater, rake, shovel, saw, hammer, and a bag of nails. Trucking across the field, I stopped about twenty feet from the first marker I had found and went to work.

By noon, I had cleared a nice square around the entire cemetery and raked the grass up. I sat down and ate the lunch I had brought with me, ham sandwiches and some chips. Chugging my third bottle of water to wash it down, I wiped my forehead and looked around past the field for some kind of timber to cut and use for a crude fence. I saw an old cottonwood tree in the distance, on it's side.

"Probably fell in that bad storm last month. Lots of branches. Perfect," I said out loud for no reason.

I cleared out the wagon and laid my tools under the tree. Grabbing the saw, I put the tractor in gear and headed towards the fallen giant.

It only took about an hour to fill the wagon up with three foot pieces of the cottonwood and I made my way back up to the old oak where my tools lay. By the end of the day, I stood back and admired

the work I had done. Nice and clear, all the stones clearly visible, with a nice small criss-cross fence all the way around.

A feeling of pride rose in me and I could feel the tears coming. I had never done anything like this in my life and it made me feel better about myself.

"Tomorrow," I decided, "I'll bring my camera out and take some pictures to post online. Maybe someone knows what this place is." I packed up my wagon and headed home, feeling better than I had in my entire life.

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The next day, I headed out to the field at about eleven in the morning. I thought the light at this time of day would be perfect for the pictures. When I entered the field and the old oak tree came into view, I noticed that there was a gathering of people already at the cemetery.

"Oh great. They're pissed off and going to accuse me of vandalism or something." I headed up the hill to see what was going on and defend myself if necessary. As I got closer, I began to smell food and realized they had come together for some kind of fellowship. Still curious about the cemetery's history, I continued up the hill to see what these folks could tell me about this place.

To my surprise, when I got to the small, newly built fence, everyone turned their attention to me and began to clap. I stopped

dead in my tracks. A young black woman walked up to me and gave me a big hug.

"Thank you," she said. "You've given this place and it's residents the respect they never had.

She must have seen the look of confusion on my face, because she took my hand and led me to the table of food. "This cemetery is the final resting place for slaves. In life and death, they were never treated with dignity. Until you came along."

The feeling of pride I had yesterday returned, but it was multiplied until a smile radiated from my face and I was hugging and shaking hands with everyone there. Food was prepared already and someone handed me a plate of food.

I settled under the oak to eat and watch the children play in the distance, outside the new fence. The smile was still on my face as I feasted on the roasted pig and corn on the cob.

Finished with my meal, I went back to the main gathering of people. A large man came forward and shook my hand again. "We threw this party for you, as a way of saying thanks."

"Thank you," I said. "I did it because it seemed right. I had no clue about this place until yesterday. I would like to take a picture of this party, if that's ok."

He gathered everyone around and I set the timer and joined them. After the picture snapped, a very old woman stepped forward and said, "Time to go." We joined hands and bowed our heads as the large man began a long, soulful prayer.

When the prayer was over, we all said "Amen" in unison, very loudly. But as I opened my eyes and looked around to help clean up, I saw nothing.

Noone.

No food, no children, no large man.

They were all gone.

Confused, I walked to where I had left my camera after the group picture. I turned it on and looked at the last picture taken.

Just me against the old oak tree. No food or any other people. No sign of the fellowship that had taken place.

I sat down and started to think maybe I was crazy. Then I saw it.

A grease stain on my shirt, from the roasted pig. And it hit me. The slaves had come back to thank me for taking care of their new home.

I packed up my camera and went home without taking the pictures I had come for. I didn't tell anyone about what had happened. Who would believe me?

That was five years ago. I still take care of that place. I've always gone alone, in hope that I would meet those poor souls once again.

I think it may have been a one time deal, though.