



Preserving a Historic Graveyard

Woodlawn Cemetery is hallowed ground in West Southern Pines

BY ELIZABETH NORFLEET SUGG • PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAURA GINGERICH

In a quiet acreage filled with arching, magnificent pines rest the memorials to a multitude of lives well spent. Woodlawn Cemetery, a historically African American burial ground, is on the corner of West New York Avenue and South Pine Street in West Southern Pines, surrounded by neighborhood streets carved out by families who came to this budding town to seize opportunity and put down deep roots.

A year after Southern Pines incorporated in 1887, the Seaboard Air Line Railroad began its route through the town, a desirable East Coast midpoint. With nearby Pinehurst opening its resort in 1895, the two municipalities were in the early stages of developing a tourist economy as fair-weather resorts, in the process generating a range of service jobs that lured workers

to the area. Fort Bragg, now Fort Liberty, opened in 1918, and a continued migration to West Southern Pines came from men and women who served in the military. They met others in this close-knit community and began second careers becoming teachers, principals, nurses, opening an auto repair shop, corner stores, and ministering at a growing cluster of churches — living lives that would inspire generations to come. It's both striking and humbling to learn that over 170 veterans from conflicts as far apart as World War I and the Persian Gulf War are buried at Woodlawn.

“Woodlawn Cemetery is a home to so many who gave to this nation, and their descendants continue to give,” says retired Col. Morris Goins, whose family has deep roots in West Southern Pines beginning with his grandparents, Theodore Roosevelt



Cemetery began on land that belonged to the Buchan family, about 6-7 acres that backed up to the Rosenwald School built by the West Southern Pines township in 1925. As the neighborhood grew, the heart of the community was its school and the tree-lined burial ground that abutted it.

Retired Lt. Col. Vincent Gordan, one of four sons of a school principal and an elementary school teacher, grew up in a Sears and Roebuck house around the corner from West Southern Pines High School. Gordan was working as a senior trainer at the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.

and Marie Goins. His father, Thomas Theadore Goins, and four uncles served in the U.S. Army in World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War, collectively. Two of his uncles, Master Sgt. Henry Lewis Wooten Jr. (1925-1963) and Command Sgt. Maj. Fredrick Robinson (1933-2009), received the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart.

Goins' uncle Cecil Roosevelt Goins (1926-2000) served in World War II when the Army was still segregated and became one of the few African American officers in the 1st Infantry Division during the Korean War. Later, in the U.S. Marshals Service, Cecil Goins went to Selma, Alabama, following the violence of Bloody Sunday. Another historic assignment took him to Houston, where he protected Muhammad Ali during his trial for refusing to be drafted in 1967 during the Vietnam War. Another uncle, retired Maj. Allen Thurman Goins (1935-1997), was a Cobra helicopter pilot in Vietnam. On a flying mission making a "gun run" into a small village, his helicopter – call sign Panther 6 – was hit by ground fire. A bullet burrowed between Goins' cheek and flight helmet, another between his temple and helmet. He woke up in a hospital. The injuries caused periodic seizures, ending his flying career. Decades later Morris Goins was walking in Washington, D.C., dressed in his uniform, when an older gentleman stopped him, read the name on his chest and asked if there were any aviators in his family. Given away by a strong family resemblance, Goins confirmed that the person the gentleman served with was his Uncle Allen.

In 1923 West Southern Pines became one of the first incorporated Black townships in North Carolina, and even after it was annexed by the municipality of Southern Pines in 1931, the community maintained its significant rooted heritage. Woodlawn

After American Airlines Flight 77 struck the Pentagon's west side, Gordan immediately began knocking on doors to help evacuate the building. The next day cots were brought in for Gordan and his colleagues to begin orchestrating the multi-level U.S. response to the attack by al-Qaida. Gordan's final career move was as a division chief for the U.S. Census Bureau managing a \$200 million budget. The experience proved invaluable when the late Rev. Fred Walden asked him to take over a nonprofit to help reinvigorate the West Southern Pines community – the Southern Pines Land & Housing Trust.

Walden was a beloved figure in Southern Pines, a veteran himself having served as an Army chaplain assistant. When he moved his young family back to Moore County in 1973 he continued a legacy begun by his great-grandparents, followed by his grandparents, parents, siblings, aunts, uncles and their children. Taking over from his uncle, A.C. Walden, he ran the West Side Garage for 45 years, balancing faith ministries, serving on the Southern Pines Town Council, membership at the Rufus McLaughlin American Legion Post No. 177, and becoming a founding member of the Rotary Club of the Sandhills. Walden established the nonprofit Southern Pines Land & Housing Trust (SPLHT) to help protect property for the African American community and others in Southern Pines, and to aid people in keeping their land to foster the creation of generational wealth so vital to sustained financial well-being. In 2018, Walden called Gordan to come home and help reinvigorate the organization and its mission. His words were, "Vince, I need you."

"My original reason (for taking the position as board chair) was because Fred saw his community going down," says Gordan. "When I came home from the military West Southern Pines



*Left to right, back row: Morris and Yolanda Goins, Bill Ross.
Left to right, front row: Dot Brower, Peggie Caple, Joyce Jackson.*

was a totally different atmosphere and environment than the one I left. There were changes that needed to be made, and I now, too, wanted to make them.”

The organization is headquartered in the former schoolhouse that in the 1940s became the segregated West Southern Pines High School and that in the 1960s evolved into the desegregated Southern Pines Elementary School. The Land & Housing Trust campus includes a playground named for an adored school principal, Blanchie Carter Discovery Park, the school gymnasium and auditorium – both of which can be rented out through the West Southern Pines Center, an entity under the umbrella of the SPLHT. In recent years Woodlawn Cemetery has also been

overseen by the SPLHT with the Buchan family formally deeding the land to the Trust. The cemetery’s point person is yet another veteran, retired Staff Sgt. Bill Ross, who was a special populations coordinator with the Moore County Schools until his retirement there.

“Woodlawn was the only place to bury African Americans up to the 1970s,” says Ross, who like Gordan grew up in West Southern Pines, walking to school in the family-oriented neighborhood. Ross’ maternal grandparents were Claude and Essie Strickland, who moved from the Dunn area to West Southern Pines in the late 1800s. Claude Strickland opened a popular corner grocery and also worked for Hayes Book Shop delivering newspapers. What spurs Ross’ volunteer service is a desire to bring

back “the camaraderie that I grew up with, that family connection, our community.” Once a star basketball player in the nearby gym, Ross watches over his family members buried in Woodlawn, his father Lucius Ross, a WWII veteran, mother Edith and, tragically, his daughter Barbra, who died in 1998.

Bringing much needed structure to the care and landscape of Woodlawn Cemetery has been a goal of the SPLHT board. In 2023 Gordan and Ross reached out to the Southern Pines Garden Club for its assistance updating the landscaping at both the front and side entrance gates. With funds raised from their annual Home & Garden Tour, the Southern Pines Garden Club also committed to building the recently completed brick memo-



Top: Matthew Walden. Below: Linda (Walden) and Lewis Cameron.



rial wall where brass nameplates will honor the veterans buried there. Patrick Kujawski of RK Masonry donated the labor.

Morris Goins and his wife, Yolanda, a mathematics professor pursuing a Ph.D. in higher education and the daughter of retired U.S. Army veterans Leon and Pearline Pempleston of Petersburg, Virginia, also plan to contribute to the restoration of Woodlawn. Plans in the works include irrigation installation, sodding the entire cemetery, employing ground-penetrating radar to locate old graves without markers, installing markers where there are none or where they've been lost, and creating a fund where the SPLHT can regularly contract with a landscaper for weekly maintenance.

For decades the maintenance was done by family members and volunteers like longtime friends Peggie Caple and Joyce Jackson, who joined the West Southern Pines Garden Club Cemetery Committee. Annual Memorial Day celebrations were held through 2019 to help raise money for landscaping and to pay Woodlawn's longstanding caretaker, the late Halbert Kearns. The group planned Woodlawn Cemetery Days with special speakers in addition to music events at area churches called "Woodlawn Day in Song." The effort was aided by twice-a-year cleanup days conducted by the Pinecrest Air Force Junior ROTC. The cemetery committee was dedicated to the cause, even outlasting the garden club itself. Originally from Virginia, Jackson was the clerk in the Southern Pines Water Department during the week and worked evenings and weekends in the Carolina Dining Room at the Pinehurst Resort. Caple is a West Southern Pines native who has never lived more than a few blocks away from her childhood school and Woodlawn Cemetery. A longtime director of financial aid at Sandhills Community College, she finished her career there as the disabilities and placement testing coordinator.

"In our area Woodlawn is the resting place of African American descent," says Caple.

The renewed spirit to preserve West Southern Pines is special to Matthew Walden, Fred Walden's son, who is also a minister. Under the leadership of executive director Sandra L. Dales, he serves on the SPLHT board, which is securing funding to convert the former school and its campus into a multipurpose community and business center with an incubator kitchen and workspace for area entrepreneurs. Nora Bowman is chief operating officer of the West Southern Pines Center and handles the renting of the gymnasium and auditorium as well as the development of local events. Bob Smith is the curator of the future museum at the SPLHT dedicated to preserving the history of the area's remarkable citizenry. Walden's involvement with the organization his father began is born of the same desire to bring back the family-oriented community that he believes has been so vital to grounding his life. On walks through Woodlawn, he's with family.

"When I see their names, memories come alive," he says.

To learn more about the SPLHT or to contribute financially or as a volunteer, visit splandandhousingtrust.org.

A former magazine publisher, cookbook author and periodic writer, Elizabeth Norfleet Sugg now runs Rubicon Farm, a wedding and event venue in West End. Contact her at ensugg@rubiconfarmnc.com.





Bill Ross who now oversees Woodlawn Cemetery through his work at the Southern Pines Land & Housing Trust.