

History In Our Midst (complete article from 9/2007 newsletter)

By Patti LeConte

The Valley Mede Community was developed upon the former estate of Arcadia, built in the late 1700's by Caleb Dorsey. His son built "Brick House on the Pike" which is still standing just off Rt. 40 past the Greenway entrance to Valley Mede. In those days, it was common to bury family members on your own property, and their private family burial plot stands at the corner of what is now Longview and Hearthstone Roads. Most of the 43 stones in the old cemetery have been broken or are now missing, as are the elaborate table-top tombs (boxes that were placed over the graves) and the granite walls that surrounded it. The statue of an angel (now headless and its wings broken) which presided over the children's cemetery was rescued and is in safekeeping with Preservation Howard County. Four generations of Dorsey's are buried within. Legend has it that slave graves and children who were stillborn or died at birth were placed outside the cemetery walls. The oldest dated burial is "Caleb Dorsey of Thos. Jr. who departed this life 17th Aug. 1809 Age 3 Yrs." The most famous resident is Sally Ann Dorsey, the wife of Maryland's 33rd Governor, Thomas Watkins Ligon. Her tombstone is listed in the DAR's inscriptions at Arcadia, "Sacred to the memory of Sally Ann Ligon, wife of T.W. Ligon and eldest daughter of Charles W. & Mary T. Dorsey, Born 18th of July 1817, Died 28th of Aug 1847, aged 30 years, 1 mo. 10 days."

We recently interviewed local resident Sue Stein, who has worked for most of the last 20 years to preserve the cemetery. Over that time she has arranged for several Eagle Scout projects to improve the area. Once, the Blue Angels (yes, the Navy fliers!) were stationed in the area. They take on a community project wherever they go and Sue brought them in to clean up the area around the headstones. Sue says that one of the biggest challenges is keeping up with the weed growth. "Once you get a section cleaned out," she says "and moved on to another, the weeds fill back in very quickly." Quite a few community residents have volunteered their time over the years. "One of the first neighbors to help me was Pat Saleh. We've become good friends since then." They have done a few plantings in the area, but most of the work is in removing the weeds, debris and trash. Not surprisingly, an overgrown cemetery attracts attention from people looking for a place to hang out, party and vandalize. Much of the trash that accumulates is beer and liquor bottles and at least one syringe has been found. Sue told us that Eagle Scout Adam Hall's grandfather donated a bench after Adam's project, but sadly that bench was stolen.

Sue is no longer physically able to keep up the work at the cemetery, so it is time to pass the torch. Restoration is being considered as a project that could be undertaken by other groups in our community. Fred Dorsey of Preservation Howard County (who is also a Dorsey family descendant) met with the VMCA board over the summer to discuss the cemetery. During this meeting, we learned that more than just a general clean up of brush and debris is required when dealing with this kind of historical site. Restoration protocol is that several initial steps precede any kind of long lasting cleanup. Master Gardeners will need to assist us with the assessment of native plants and identification of invasive species. Once the invasive species (weeds) are removed, Preservation Howard County comes in and uses a grid system to document the interior of the cemetery. These steps are necessary because positioning of plants and even ordinary rocks can indicate where graves were located. Afterward, ongoing maintenance would require 1 – 2

days of service per month. Because of the time and costs involved, community support for the project is needed before we begin. The one-time fixes from the several Eagle Scout projects have improved the site, but on-going maintenance is the biggest challenge.

Restoration will be a big job, but it has been done nearby, and done very well. The Whipps Cemetery, on St. John's Lane, is a model of how restored cemeteries can benefit the community. Barbara Sieg has worked this site for more than 20 years. There are lovely walkways and plantings of shrubs, trees and flowers. A woodland theater is being created. It serves as a preserve for native plants, a public park, a place for history appreciation and a site for community service work and education. If you are curious about what Arcadia could become, we urge you to take a walk around Whipps, located across Frederick Road on St. John's Lane (just beyond Rita's Italian Ice). We look forward to having residents share their knowledge of the cemetery with us. Keep an eye out for signs in the neighborhood announcing a meeting about this historical project!