

HISTORIC AFRICAN AMERICAN GETHSEMENE CEMETERY OPEN FOR BERGEN COUNTY'S *JUNETEENTH CELEBRATION* SATURDAY JUNE 18, 2011

As part of Bergen County's *Juneteenth Celebration* at Overpeck Park in Leonia, Saturday, June 18, 2011, the county's historic African American Gethsemane Cemetery in Little Ferry will be open to the public. This unique Bergen County Historic Site, which is managed by the Bergen County Department of Parks and the Division of Cultural and Historic Affairs, holds a significant place in the county's African American heritage. *Juneteenth* is the oldest nationally celebrated commemoration of the ending of slavery in the United States



"Juneteenth: Celebrating Freedom and Unity" will take place at Overpeck Park, Leonia on the "Great Lawn," 10 am-6 pm, rain or shine. On the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War, we will recognize the descendants of the Bergen County men who served in the war, including Peter H. Billings and Silas M. Carpenter, Twenty-Ninth (Colored) Connecticut Volunteer Regiment, who were buried at Gethsemane. Arnold Brown, Gethsemane Historian, will be leading two cemetery tours.

Minibuses will leave from Overpeck Park at 2 and 2:45 pm, returning at 3 and 3:45 pm. The cemetery will also be open from 1-4 pm for those who wish to drive directly to the cemetery for self-guided tours. Its entrance is on Summit Place in Little Ferry, one block north of Route 46,

Gethsemane Cemetery is a 1-acre sandy hill located west of the Hackensack River in the northern half of Little Ferry. It is not known when the first interment was made here. A deed of sale on November 17, 1860 to three prominent white Hackensack residents states that this one acre of land was to be used as a "cemetery for the colored population of the Village of Hackensack..." On March 21, 1901, the *Gethsemane Cemetery Association* was incorporated and the "Colored Cemetery" passed from white to black trusteeship. The cemetery's official name then became *Gethsemane Cemetery*. The graves of over 500 people have been documented.

Gethsemane Cemetery figured prominently in the controversy surrounding the burial of Samuel Bass, sexton of Hackensack's First Baptist Church. When he died in January 1884 he was denied burial in the all-white Hackensack Cemetery. Instead, his family and church buried him in Gethsemane. New Jersey Governor Leon Abbett protested the denial in a strongly worded statement to the State Legislature. Two months later in March 1884, legislation dubbed the "*Negro Burial Bill*" was passed.



Burials continued in Gethsemane until the 1920s but over time the site was neglected and vandalized. Stones were stolen or broken, and the cemetery became a dumping ground. Threatened with destruction through development, members of the African American community began the fight to save the cemetery. By 1985, the title passed to Bergen County, which insured it against development and work began on Gethsemane's restoration as a County-owned historic site. The staff of the Bergen County Division of Cultural and Historic Affairs and volunteers of the African American Studies Committee of the Bergen County Historical Society conducted a comprehensive survey and inventory. Further research and restoration of some of the stones followed.

Gethsemane Cemetery was entered onto the New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places in 1994, due to the significant role it played in the enactment of New Jersey's early civil rights legislation, as well as containing evidence of West African burial customs. In 2003 the County celebrated the dedication of new meditation areas with interpretive panels that tell the story of this historic cemetery. They include three panels with the names of 515 of those buried here.

For more information on the Juneteenth Celebration or Gethsemane Cemetery, please call Arnold Brown at 201-745-6975; the Division of Cultural and Historic Affairs at 201-336-7267 or email jstrom@co.bergen.nj.us. Or go to: www.co.bergen.nj.us

