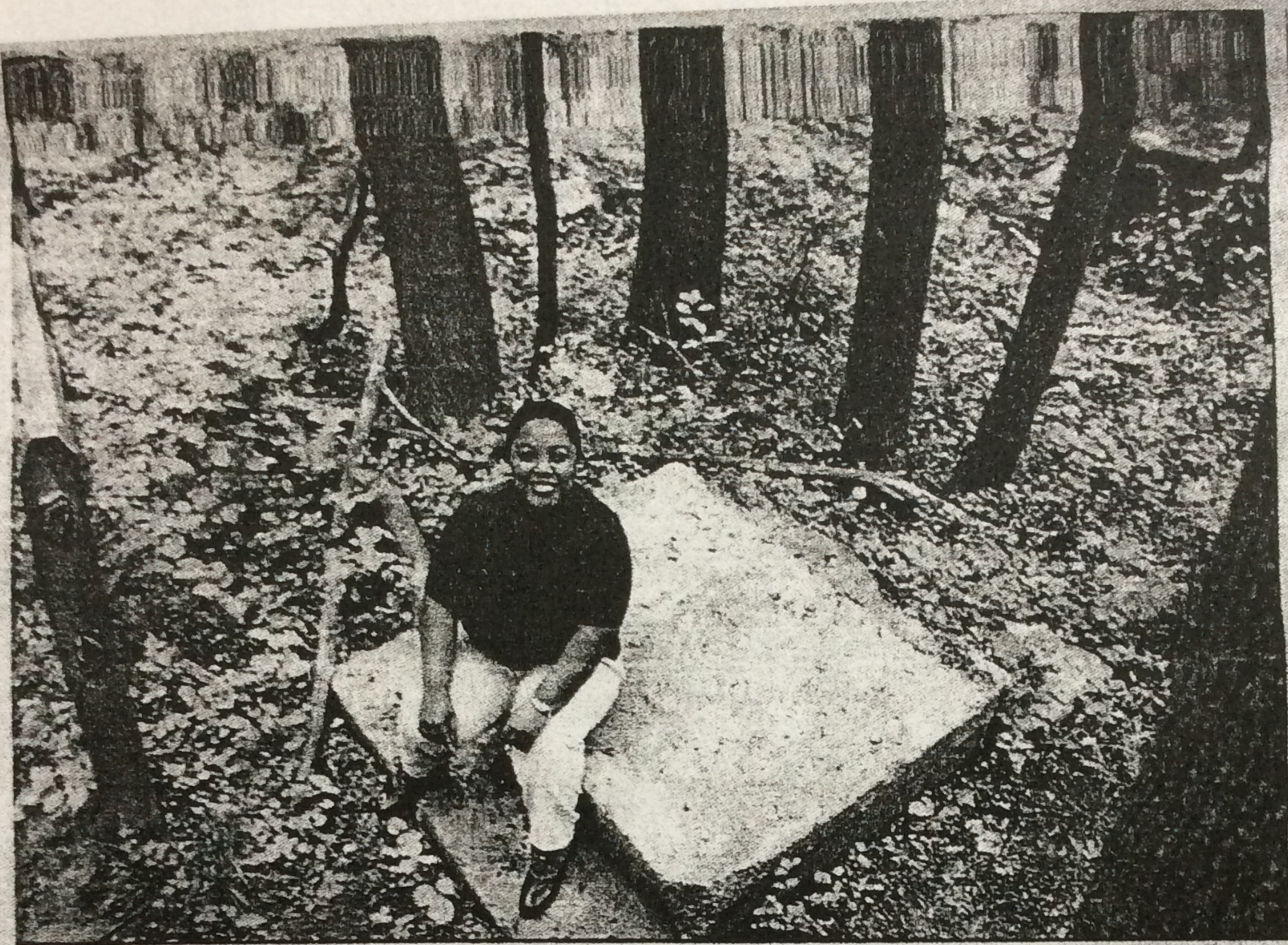


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Katherine Frey/Journal

Sondra Stevenson, a lifelong Rockville resident, sits on the stoop of what was once her maternal great-great-grandfather Benjamin Franklin Smith's two-story house. Through his papers she has rediscovered a "colored cemetery" where her ancestors may be buried.

A woman's plot to unearth her history

Rockville resident believes she found old family cemetery site

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staff writer

When Rockville native Sondra Stevenson and her co-worker traded their heels for more rugged footwear one afternoon in March, they weren't going on any walk. Stevenson was in search of her roots and went to find what old family lore, maps and maps said was a "colored cemetery" in the backwoods of the Rockville Civic Center. After a recent return trip to the site, Stevenson found three trees tied with fluorescent ribbons marking vaguely the boundaries of the cemetery she believes contains the remains of slavery-era relatives. The ribbons — placed

there by now-retired public works administrator Bob VanZant — signify the county's acknowledgment of the cemetery and its attempt to section off the land for preservation.

And it's another lead on Stevenson's search for her family history.

"It seems the city of Rockville has always had an interest in finding the cemetery," Stevenson said, referring to notes and documents that have surfaced during her exploration. "I wanted to go over there because people said there were headstones there."

What once was a solemn green hillside dotted with handmade wooden grave markers — as Stevenson's aunt, Bea Brown, remembers —

is now a lot overgrown with foliage and littered with rusted bed frames, glass and cement pipes used for dumping sewage. Although the wooden markers have deteriorated and the "few rough stones" noted in county records are not distinct amid the grassy land, city maps dating back to 1889 show a rectangular block where the cemetery sits.

Stevenson's journey began when she attempted to trace her bloodline last summer, starting with a family document compiled by her grandfather outlining marriages, births, deaths and land the family owned. Mentioned

Please see ROOTS, A10



Katherine Frey/Journal

Three trees tied with fluorescent ribbons on the grounds of Rockville Civic Center mark the boundaries of a cemetery Sondra Stevenson believes contains the remains of her slavery-era ancestors.

Woman roots out history

ROOTS from A1

in the papers is "an acre of land which was located on Avery Road" sold to Stevenson's maternal great-great-great grandfather, Benjamin Franklin Smith, an ex-slave born in 1849 who "worked on the [Glenview] farm where the Rockville Civic Center is now located" along with the Glenview Mansion.

On that acre, which Smith bought for \$1, stood the family's two-story house, where the foundation remains today. And down Avery Road — which is now no more than a dirt path after that section was closed in the 1960s to make way for state Route 28 — is the "colored cemetery" where Stevenson believes Smith and his descendents rest.

"It really seemed like so much [information] was coming from family. I didn't expect to get stumped with the cemetery," Stevenson, a 36-year-old federal employee, said about her first trip to the sites. But, she said, "I enjoy coming here because it really gives you a sense of identity."

Smith's land, formerly owned by Judge Richard Johns Bowie, was detailed in 1884 deeds Stevenson obtained from the Montgomery County Land Records Office. And although the family did not own the cemetery land, Stevenson, after finding county records, believes Smith, his first wife Jane, Jane's mother, members of the Browning family and other blacks are buried there. Stevenson also said the cemetery may be the oldest reserved for "coloreds" in the county because Jane died in 1885, rivaling the Haiti graveyard on Martins Lane in Rockville that dates back to 1889.

Stevenson's goal now is to have the cemetery land cleared and to erect a wooden split-rail fence "to preserve it and maintain it."

Rob Orndorff, a horticulturalist for the county, said there are no laws requiring Rockville to maintain cemeteries, but that he and other county officials are acting on a "volunteer basis" to help Stevenson find the exact cemetery boundaries. Orndorff said if any action were taken to preserve the site, the work would have to be performed by volunteers. Any more work, such as conducting excavation to detect bones underground, "would cost a great deal and would be up to the family's discretion."

Eileen McGuckian, director of the historical society Peerless Rockville, has helped Stevenson unearth her history and said the preservation of the cemetery would be beneficial to the history of Rockville.

"Cemeteries give you an idea of where the people lived, worked and died," said McGuckian, who is writing a book on the city's history.

Stevenson said she wants the county to acknowledge that the cemetery is there and raise a plaque with the names of the people she can prove are interred there. Stevenson won't have to fight for the preservation of the lot on which Smith's house stood — it's already been fenced and included in the Woodland Trail, a self-guided path frequented by hikers.

The city also will begin construction this summer on a nature center, which will stand just down the path from the cemetery. Stevenson said the city should give equal attention to its rich history.

"I don't think the cemetery should be forgotten," Stevenson said. "It gives you a sense of where you came from."