

New technology leads to where the bodies are buried

BY CARLI TEPROFF



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Hallandale Beach has been making several improvements to its historic cemetery, including an online mapping system that shows who is buried where.

Every Veterans Day, Mary Washington would visit her brother's gravesite at the Hallandale Beach Cemetery and leave a flag in honor of his service to his country.

But without a grave marker, Washington had trouble finding exactly where her brother was buried — and she wasn't alone.

For more than 100 years, family members have been burying loved ones at the seven-acre cemetery located at 801 NW Sixth Ave. But until recently, if family didn't buy a headstone, there was no marker on the grave site. And time itself took its toll on several of the concrete stones, eroding names and other biographical information carved decades ago.

Prompted by concerns and questions from people seeking to find where their loved ones were buried plot, the city hired a company to run a website that allows people to search for a specific plot.

"This was really meant to be a tool for the citizens to make it as easy as possible," said Gary Gibson, the Hallandale Beach's assistant operations manager.

For nearly a year, names of the several thousands of people buried there were entered into a computer-mapping system created by Ramaker & Associates.

Now in order to find a grave site, a person can go to www.map.ramaker.com/Hallandale and type in the name.

Up pops a map of the cemetery, with a red dot indicating the site. Also given is the person's birth and death dates.

Using an online database is a fairly new concept, said Ryan Quinn, whose family owns Fred Hunter's, which has three cemeteries in Hollywood.

"It's something that is just starting to get traction," said Quinn, who added it is something they would be open to looking at.

According to Brandon Finely, vice president of Ramaker, the Hollywood Beach Cemetery is the only one in South Florida that uses the company's service. It has about 600 cemeteries nationwide.

"It's getting more and more popular," Finely said.

The city paid \$24,000 to create the web site and now pays \$1,300 yearly to maintain it, according to Ted LaMott, the city's information technology director.

In the past, if a person couldn't find a gravesite all they had to do was ask, said Gibson adding that the city kept great records throughout the years — including a handwritten work order dating back to 1904.

“We could always find someone,” he said. “But this is more user-friendly.”

Gibson said the website is only a part of some the recent improvements made to the cemetery.

Recently, the city widened and painted the entrance gate. With \$75,000 budgeted for more improvements this year, there are plans to add a gazebo where mourners can gather after a ceremony.

The city also created a cemetery advisory board to oversee the property.

Hallandale Beach Vice Mayor Anthony Sanders said the cemetery improvements were a long time in coming. He said he has been receiving complaints for a while and is happy that the city has begun to make some improvement.

“It's worth the investment,” said Sanders. “The cemetery is an important part of the city's history.”

But the city needs to do a lot more, according to James Bowers, who has several family members buried there.

He first complained more than a year ago when he had trouble locating his father's grave.

He's hoping the city will restore or replace the monuments eroded by the elements, and add markers at the older graves where there are no headstones. (In recent years, the cemetery did begin installing round metal markers with the deceased person's name, and the dates of their birth and death.)

“This place is sacred,” said Bowers, pointing to several concrete slabs that no longer proffered who lay there. “We need to treat it like that.”