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Springhill marker unveiling setBy **ROBERT LEE LONG**
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Friends of Springhill Cemetery, the oldest cemetery in DeSoto County, rescued from years of neglect, will unveil a state historic marker for the cemetery in a noon ceremony on Friday.

Hernando resident Tom Ferguson, who helped spearhead the project along with archaeologist Mary Evelyn Starr, said it's expected city officials, state and local historical representatives and relatives of some of the city's earliest pioneers will attend.

"It's about the heritage of this town," Ferguson said Monday as he rested his hands on the new historic marker, a designation which has been nearly three decades in the making.

"They started working on this in the eighties," Ferguson said of one of the earliest efforts to clean up and restore the cemetery to its former glory.

Those efforts waxed and waned over the years until Ferguson, Starr, and a group of Northwest Mississippi Community College students got involved and began researching the headstones of individuals buried within its hallowed grounds.

Ferguson's efforts began in earnest about three and a half years ago.

"The first mayor and the first sheriff are in here along with several Masons and other historic figures," said Ferguson, whose father N.C. Ferguson, Sr., a former alderman, is also buried here.

The elder Ferguson's handsome tombstone is among the largest in the cemetery which dates to 1837, shortly after Hernando, and before that, the town of Jefferson, was established.

Last fall, a group of volunteer actors staged the first annual All Hallow's Eve Lamplight Tour of Springhill which city officials hope will become a city tourism staple.

More than \$700 was raised during the Halloween event on the heels of a successful benefit concert by blues singer Jimbo Mathus which also raised several hundred dollars toward the effort.

Those funds were coupled with a \$2,000 grant bestowed by the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi.

"We have had great community support," Ferguson said.

Since restoration of the cemetery began, graves long ago thought to be lost or missing have been recovered in the dense underbrush.

Many badly-damaged tombstones have now been stabilized in boxes of sand.

"The Hernando Civic Garden Club and DeSoto garden Club are going to plant trees again this year," Ferguson said.

Cedars, oaks, redbuds and other native trees have been planted to restore the natural habitat.

Springhill was the city's public burial ground, beginning with the establishment of DeSoto County in 1836. The five-acre site has around 100 marked graves, although it may have originally held as many as 500, including African-American slaves on the sloping hill due north of the visible cemetery boundaries.

Only six graves date after the year 1900. The cemetery was abandoned and allowed to grow up in privet hedge and kudzu.

The Mississippi Department of Archives and History approved the marker late last year, which bears the following inscription:

"Springhill Cemetery, the oldest in DeSoto County, was established in 1836 by the original town plan of Hernando. Provision of a public burial ground at a community's edge was a significant characteristic of Victorian-era town planning and provided as an alternative to church and family cemeteries. Its heaviest use occurred in the 1850s. Monuments include early settlers, 1878 yellow fever victims and Civil War veterans."

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