

SAFETY HARBOR

Living

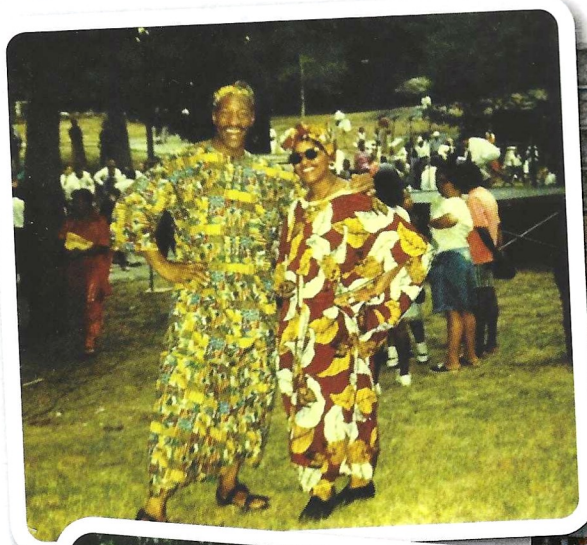
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MEET THE HAYES FAMILY

*A Granddaughter's Journey to Finish What
Her Grandfather Couldn't*

Photo by Julie Effron Photo & Video



Meet the Hayes Family

A Granddaughter's Journey to Finish What Her Grandfather Couldn't

By Laura Kepner | Photo by Julie Effron Photo & Video

All other Photos provided by Whispering Souls African American Cemetery Restoration Project

African American cemeteries throughout the South have received extensive publicity lately. Many such stories end without resolution, but for a Safety Harbor historical cemetery, over 100 years of black history is being honored rather than destroyed.

Jacqueline Hayes' grandparents, Charlie and Amanda Smith, had relocated to Safety Harbor from Georgia in the 1920s for the "healing waters" so their premature baby, Goldie, could grow up strong. Charlie built a small home on Elm Street, and would later construct a better, sturdier house near that same spot.

The Smiths had a second daughter, Ruth, and she and Goldie grew up here. Sometime in the 1940s, Ruth left for better opportunities—headed north, to Boston. She raised five children there: four daughters and a son and once her kids were out of school, Ruth Hayes returned home with her youngest daughter. It was 1974.

Ruth's son Frederick Hayes was a presence to behold. Family was his center—the drive behind his determination. So, when his mother became ill, Frederick left his dance career in Boston and relocated to Safety Harbor to

help care for her and his youngest sister. He stayed, even after Ruth passed.

Jacqueline had also formed a life in Boston. She'd spent some years as a journalist and some as a social worker. In 2015, her father and her aunt Goldie were in their 90s. Both needed help. Around the same time, Frederick was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Jacqueline came to Florida, to the same neighborhood where Charlie and Amanda, Goldie and her mother Ruth had lived.

"Our grandfather was a leader in the black community. He had more money than most



of his neighbors and that put him in a difficult position," Jacqueline says.

Charlie Smith was employed by some of the town's most prominent white men, some of whom were rumored members of the KKK. Besides building the St. James Hotel and other downtown properties, he also worked in the background, sweeping floors, staying silent, even when he overheard remarks about his peers.

"Our grandfather was a conflicted man," Jacqueline says. "But he helped build Safety Harbor—he laid the first bricks on Main Street and Frederick wanted Charlie Smith's name to be recognized because his story had never been told."

Jacqueline remembers how important their legacy was to Frederick. He made it his mission to tell their family's story through whatever means possible, even choreographing a music and dance performance to a full house downtown, at the Presbyterian church. Jacqueline had participated in the performance too—for Fred.

"He had said, 'You need to keep doing this. Keep plugging away'. I told him it was a plan," Jacqueline says. "We'd do it together."

Frederick had met their grandparents; Jacqueline never had. It was Frederick who continued visiting Charlie and Amanda after their deaths. He drove Jacqueline to a seemingly vacant lot in the middle of a residential neighborhood on South Drive, off Sunset Point Road. "That's where the cemetery's located," Jacqueline says. "The first time we went out there I was saying I don't think this is a cemetery."

When Frederick Hayes brought his sister to visit the graves of their grandparents, Jacqueline wanted to be anywhere else but there . . .

"This place was a mess," Jacqueline continues. "We were trying to clear off my grandmother's headstone. I didn't know what I was feeling. I kept wondering what this place was, in between all those houses."



Neither sibling was able to find their grandfather's grave. "Frederick knew it was there, somewhere," Jacqueline says.

At the time, the lot where her grandparents were laid to rest, was littered with fallen trees, beer bottles, and branches. Grass grew higher than her knees. "I didn't like the feeling I had when I was out there. The grounds looked so bad."



When Frederick drove her there again, Jacqueline refused to get out of the car. "He said he wouldn't leave unless I helped him clean up and reflect on the grave."

Her father passed away in 2015 and Frederick in 2016. Jacqueline didn't know where her life would turn. Besides their sister living here, she had no emotional ties to Safety Harbor. But she stayed to care for her sister.

"The Historical Society asked me to do a talk for Black History Month. It was February, 2017, and I was torn because Fred had just died and I felt my life was at a crossroads." Jacqueline decided to participate. "I remembered the promise I had made to him."

A local man named Lou Claudio was in the audience. Jacqueline remembers how he took his time to approach her after she had spoken. "A lot of people don't know black people contributed to building Safety Harbor," she says. "But he asked me if I knew about the cemetery."

What Jacqueline didn't know at the time was that Claudio had been researching black cemeteries long before they were in the news, especially the one on South Drive, which, many years after annexation, is now in Clearwater.

"I told him my grandparents had been buried there. Lou had been trying to set up a group to clean it up but didn't have any help. He asked if I would help him, so I said yeah, sure," Jacqueline recalls.

"When he gave me his number I still didn't know if I was going left or right. I didn't call him. He had to wait. My mind kept telling me I needed to call but even though I always kept his card, I never did." Finally, Jacqueline was contacted by the museum. "Two months is a long time for Lou," she says. "I know that now."

They made an appointment to talk. "We went through twenty years of research," Jacqueline says. "He showed me papers from the St. Paul Helping Hand Society, a black lodge that held the last known ownership of the property."

There were three names on the deed: Son Brown, Isaac Banks, and Charlie Smith.

That's the moment it all came together: Jacqueline had to help Lou. She had to find a way to get the cemetery in better shape—to continue what her grandfather had started.

"Lou had a blueprint of stuff we needed to do. We had to form a board, a non-profit. We had to get the community involved," Jacqueline says. "Our first order of business was to schedule a cleanup. By the time we put the word out, we had already had a group of people and



they showed up! All those people . . . I was blown away."

Next, Jacqueline reached out to those she thought might agree to participate as board members. She also worked with Lou to research more of the cemetery's history. She spoke at black churches and called on local families.

The earliest grave is that of Samuel Swann, an infant who died in 1896. Little Samuel was born in a time when black people were buried in their own cemeteries—even after death they were not considered equal. Ironically, the last person to be buried there was Charlie Smith in 1973.

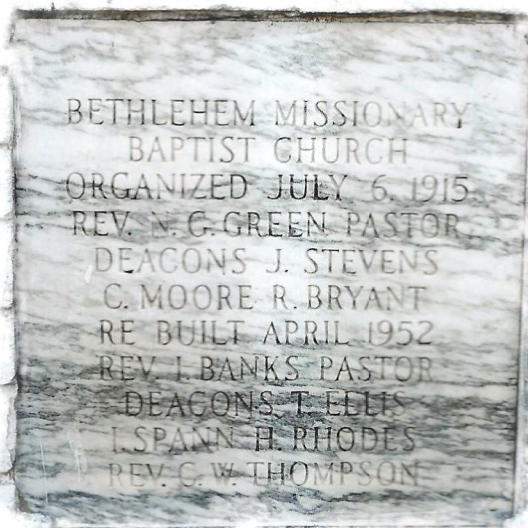
In the late 1800s, the property was likely an open area surrounded by citrus groves and native shrubbery. It had first been designated as a cemetery by the McMullens, who owned the land, and in 1902 the groves, including the cemetery, were purchased by Solomon Smith Coachman.

He lost it to the government during the Great Depression. It was later purchased by Alfred and Louisa Ehle who built the subdivision that now surrounds the lot where approximately 100 bodies are buried—most of which are unidentified.

In 1951, the Ehles deeded the cemetery to the St. Paul Helping Hand Society, the lodge that Jacqueline's grandfather helped form. In 1953, the society sold the cemetery to the "Safety Harbor Colored Community" for one dollar.

"These men in the group had a little more than everybody else," Jacqueline says. "If you didn't have money, they didn't turn you down. They handled the whole burial, from the notice in the newspaper to digging the grave. They were a social group and raised money, but their focus was the cemetery."

Jacqueline remembers the first meeting and how far she and the board have come since then. "There were 25 to 30 people, black and white, all sitting around a table, ready to help."



The first order of business for the board was to rename the property—and it became Whispering Souls African American Cemetery after a board member visited the cemetery and heard the name, which came as a whisper.

While she had a lot of support, Jacqueline also remembers the naysayers. "Some believed my mission was too big," she says. "I remember saying at the first meeting that if half the people didn't show up again, but the other half did, we are going to get it done. I was never thinking it was impossible, even though I have never taken on anything of this magnitude in my life. Never been on a board, never formed a board, but we sure had a lot of support."

Andy Zodrow was one such supporter. "I knew he was a Safety Harbor City Commissioner but I didn't know he was a lawyer," Jacqueline says.

"We needed to find a lawyer, which was a struggle. It's rare to find one willing to put so much time and effort into a case pro bono. They have to put food on their table



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too. Andy was working with a law student from Stetson, trying to put this together. He happened to go to an event in Tampa and saw Herb Donica, a Tampa attorney," Jacqueline says. "Andy was trying to work on the cemetery and he described the project to Herb. Herb told him, 'I think you need me.'"

On July 16, 2021, Herb Donica's dedication to the project paid off. He sent a notification to the Whispering Souls board: Judge Meyer had entered the order and judgment confirming ownership of the cemetery. But not only that, the judge also gave Whispering Souls an extra level of

protection—it would remain a cemetery and no one would be able to make it otherwise, now or in the future.

"It is so amazing that I had to be dragged to the cemetery and now it is this place that brings me so much joy," Jacqueline says.

Prior to the pandemic, USF archaeology professor Diane Wallman, also a local, led the way for the cemetery to have ground penetrating radar (GPR) through a company called Card-

no, who generously donated their services. Now, the Whispering Souls African American Cemetery board and volunteers are looking forward to getting fencing, obtaining signage from the Pinellas County Historic Preservation Board, working toward an educational component and sometime this year, hosting a renaming ceremony. They are also trying to give back the names of every person buried there. And by the way, Charlie Smith's grave has been located, thanks to the GPR. It is near Amanda's and it was Jacqueline who found it—she got to push the machine.

"I'm sure if Frederick were alive, my mother, my aunt, my grandfather, my grandmother—they'd be happy with the work that we have done," Jacqueline says. "I came back to Florida to take care of relatives, but who knew I'd end up conquering obstacles my grandfather faced as a result of the times he lived in. This granddaughter is finishing her grandfather's work and check it out, times have changed."

For more information on Whispering Souls African American Cemetery, visit wsaac.org or Whispering Souls African American Cemetery Restoration Project on Facebook.

Disclaimer: Laura Kepner serves as secretary on the WSAAC board. For more local history or to contact Laura, visit safetyharborhistory.com.



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