



By **Barbara Taylor**

About a month ago, the Matthews Historical Foundation received an email from Jeff Houser, president of the Olde Mecklenburg Genealogical Society, asking if anyone knew of a cemetery existing in the area.

He had been contacted by Piedmont Gas worker Michael Doby, who had found a number of stones, the earliest with the date of 1817, while working in the Crestdale Crossing neighborhood.

Becky Willard, president of the Matthews Historical Foundation, forwarded the note to me, and I immediately contacted Jeff. I told him I had done over a year of research of the Crestdale/Tank Town area, resulting in an exhibit at the Matthews Heritage Museum and the documentation of the neighborhood, its churches, people and institutions. During the research, I never heard anyone ever speak of a cemetery.

As the neighborhood of Tank Town developed after the train came into the area in 1874, if there was a cemetery, it would predate the beginning of Tank Town and add a new chapter to our local history.

I had found that Dr. J. S. Gribble purchased 143 acres from W. S. Stephenson in 1857, though I could not find how Stephenson acquired the land or from whom. I called Harvey Boyd, a resident of Crestdale/Tank Town and asked him if he ever remembered seeing a graveyard or tombstones as he was growing up. Harvey had no knowledge of ever seeing such stones.

Jeff and I continued to correspond with each other, and he shared with me photos of some of the stones taken by Doby.

They were unusual as they were only 6 to 8 inches wide and ranged from 11 to 27 inches tall. We thought some were footstones. I felt strongly we were looking at stones of white people, as few slaves had engraved stones.

We agreed to meet and document the stones. They were on land owned by the Homeowners Association (HOA), and I was able to secure permission to go on the property.

On a steamy Sunday morning, May 24, we met on Ablow Drive and realized in order to walk only on HOA property would be impossible as it was terribly overgrown. The home at 713 Ablow Drive, whose back yard backed onto this area, was for sale. With some neighbors' encouragement, we accessed the site through the yard.

The stones were located approximately 100 feet behind the house in a dense patch of bamboo. The stones were scattered in the area, many leaning on bamboo trees. It didn't seem to be a cemetery, rather, the stones were from someplace else and placed here.

The puzzle was just beginning.

How did the stones get here? When the development was being built in 2000, did the Moser Company uncover the stones and move them to the wooded area? Were they from a nearby cemetery? How long had they been there? Maybe a resident of the neighborhood was gathering stones from other places. There were so many questions to be asked and answered.

Jeff and I documented 41 stones with inscriptions. There were additional stones, both similar in size and larger that had no inscriptions.

Of the 41 stones, 11 had two or three initials and a date. Jeff and I first assumed it was a death date. But 30 stones had no date, just initials.

Then we found about six small carved stones with no inscription, or "blanks." Why were they there? I suggested perhaps a stonemason had a shop nearby long ago and the stones

dates were birth dates ... waiting for their owner to pass before being placed. Plausible, but not a good answer. There was no evidence of a former structure.

Before we got into the field to examine them, Linda Dalton sent some photos to Dr. Michael Trinkley with the Chicora Foundation to ask if he had ever seen similar stones. He acknowledged he had, and that they were often for poorer white folk who couldn't afford a larger stone. This confirmed for me, we were not looking at slave markers.

There were also a few larger stones, one with two lines of scripture, difficult to read because of the dirt. Were some of them waiting to be carved into smaller stones?

Jeff offered to take our recordings and pictures and put together a preliminary report. The report was very thorough, needing a few minor corrections. Jeff was interested in the history of the property, investigating the chain of title from J. S. Gribble to the development by Moser. However, we were still focused on how did the stones get there?

We kept the State Office of Archaeology informed, sending them a copy of the preliminary report and filling out forms regarding the find.

One neighbor said her son first noticed the stones in February. As the family had lived there for many years, I wondered why the kids had only recently discovered them. One reason is their backyard and that of the neighbor's had recently been cleared of the aggressive bamboo that had taken over their property and was almost at the back door.

Did Moser play a role in this? I tracked down the Dan Moser Company, which unfortunately is now defunct. There didn't seem to be anyone to ask if they had been discovered during the development of Crestdale Crossing.

Jane Johnson, former head of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library's Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room offered her help to track the initials and dates (presumably death) for obituaries in local and Raleigh papers. Jeff and I divided up research using census records and other resources.

Shortly after Jeff finished the report, a local station broadcasted that cemetery stones had been found. While they didn't state the exact location, they filmed the site after we had documented the stones. I was very distressed that this finding was being made public, putting the stones in jeopardy of vandalism or destruction. There still was so much unknown, I didn't want to move them but felt we had to get them into storage for their safety.

Becky Willard, of the Matthews Heritage Foundation, called Matthews Town Manager Hazen Blodgett to request help to move the stones and give them safe storage. There was no hesitation on the part of the town.

The following day, May 28, a crew from Matthews Public Works, quickly and efficiently removed the stones and gently packed them onto trucks to take back to safe storage. We had had days of rain, but we were able to accomplish the move successfully in between a few light sprinkles.

Now that the stones were safely stored, I thought it time to inform a group of local historians, known as the Roundtable, to see if they had any thoughts of how to go about identifying where the stones came from and who the stones belonged to. Perhaps they would think of a different way to discover where these stones belonged.

Before the day was over, John Blythe wrote us that one of the stones belonged to two brothers, who died the same day, buried at Sardis Presbyterian Church. By the next day, he had matched almost all the initials to individuals at Sardis Presbyterian Church.

I had learned years back that David Blackley was in charge of the cemetery. I emailed him regarding our discovery. After a series of emails, he remembered that around 1970 the church cemetery was vandalized, with people knocking over footstones. The church instructed to have many of the stones lowered onto the ground, so people wouldn't knock them over.

He believes they asked Neil Huntley, caretaker for the cemetery, to remove and safely preserve them.

I could "hear" David remember more, including there were similar footstones at Sardis. For me, that would be confirmation. David also confirmed that Huntley lived at 840 Matthews School Road, an older home that backed onto the HOA property. At one point, it was his property. Huntley did as he was requested. He removed these stones to a safe location, behind his house. He passed away a few years ago, leaving a mystery to be found.