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BY THOMAS GOLDSMITH, Staff Writer

RALEIGH - They have their names back now.

Nearly 300 poor and older people, mostly residents of the Wake County Home for the Aged and Infirm, were buried between 1915 and 1976 in a Five Points-area cemetery that belongs to the county. Then they were largely forgotten.

The News & Observer brought renewed attention to the cemetery with a story published in December. Since then, the identities and pieces of the stories of people buried in this unmarked ground behind a local church have been tugged from obscurity through painstaking research by Wake County historians. To at least one family, their work has meant the answer to a decades-old puzzle, the fate of Nell Gray Mountford, the last person buried in the cemetery, in 1976.

"We had no idea what happened to her or where she was buried," said Sylvia Lewis, 72, of Angier.

Lewis, a great-niece of Mountford, has studied her own family history and that of her husband, a descendant of Mountford.

"In 1976, we had moved to Cary, and if we had known -- oh, my goodness -- we would have had her living with us," she said.

The stories revealed in the county home's handwritten death certificates help shed light on a system that preceded today's nursing homes and assisted-living centers. As such, they could be a key to understanding the way society treats and regards people who fall on hard times now.

There's also more immediate value to knowing what happened to people after they lost touch with family. Mountford's descendants recently learned that she and her sister both died of cancer; the sister of breast cancer.

"That's something that's important to know," another great-niece, Donna Owens of Durham, said of the relationship of family medical history to future risk.

Containing causes of death, occupations and other information, the documents compiled by Wake County tell compelling and sometimes harrowing stories.

For example, Sil Rachell, a former road worker, died in 1918 in the midst of the influenza pandemic that killed at least 50million worldwide.

His cause of death was listed as kidney lesions caused by "taking turpentine," a folk cure of the day for flu.

"They shouldn't be forgotten," said Kim Quintal, a Greensboro filmmaker who has made a study of North Carolina's public-welfare system of county homes, some of which persisted into this century. "The county homes were not just for the poor, but for the mentally ill, for orphans, for disabled people. It was a place for all of society's lost souls, the unwanted, the people that society just didn't know how to deal with."

These rediscovered personal histories call up ghosts from many decades of North Carolina's past, with people touched by slavery, the flu epidemic, madness, malnutrition and scorching summer heat:

Pretty Jackson died in July 1960 at age 59 of pneumonia. Contributing causes included multiple birth defects that had left her unable to talk or care for herself since birth.

### **A monument**

Wake County, which ran and funded the Home for the Aged and Infirm for 60 years, has no detailed records of its operation, not one of the reports the institution was required to submit every year.

But the county is moving slowly toward its first modern recognition of the graveyard behind Emmanuel Baptist Church on Noble Road. Mike Aull, Wake County property officer, plans to make a presentation to county commissioners next month to encourage them to recognize the cemetery formally and to accept local funeral director Jody Dupree's offer to donate a memorial stone.

The goal is to approve a single monument that will acknowledge the cemetery's history and honor the hundreds buried in it, Aull said.

After county officials' request for more information, Aull and his staff marked the corners of the cemetery based on a new survey, while Karen Allen, researcher and branch manager at the Olivia Raney Public History Library, led the search by other county staff and several volunteers for information about the people buried there.

Their hunt involved flipping electronically through 90,000 Wake County death certificates. Seven volunteers joined three staff members in the work, which took more than three months.

"You have a sense of honoring the people when you are reading their names," Allen said.

Martha Mason and William Massenburg, both 74, died of heat stroke on the same day -- June 21, 1924. Circumstances other than "extremely hot weather" are not given, but residents of the home had to work on its farm or elsewhere if they were able.

### **Varying backgrounds**

Many of the county home's residents appear to have been born to a life of extreme poverty. Others had seen significant ups and downs, such as Mountford, whom Mary Pearce, 83, of Wilmington, remembers as her beloved "Aunt Nell." Pearce recalls long summer visits with Mountford and her husband.

"They had a 40-acre piece of land outside Wake Forest, and she would invite children up for two or three weeks in the summer," Pearce recalled.

Nell Gray Mountford was born in Wake County late in the 19th century -- recorded dates vary -- and had worked as a beautician, married, lived in Yonkers, N.Y., and returned to North Carolina. She had divorced and become an active churchgoer before her death at the county home in 1976.

Through zealous detective work, Lewis and sister-in-law Donna Owens located Pearce, who supplied photographs and other information about Mountford's life. The Triangle relatives learned this month from a reporter of Mountford's death in the county home and her burial nearby.

Family photographs show a laughing Mountford, perhaps in her 30s, along with her father, a native of England who once drove a buggy around North Carolina, repairing clocks and watches for a living.

"You wouldn't see the county home in her future," said Frank Lewis, Sylvia Lewis' husband.

## **A paupers field**

Former residents of the home make up the majority of those buried in the cemetery, but Wake County also apparently used the plot as a paupers field.

Among the nonresidents were two members of county work gangs who were shot to death while trying to escape in the 1920s, several murder victims, and an unidentified infant whose body had been mangled by dogs before it was discovered and buried in 1922.

Causes of death included cancer, lung and heart disease, and other maladies that still kill people. But the list also includes diagnoses such as dementia praecox, most likely Alzheimer's disease, as well as dropsy, a term that likely described swelling caused by congestive heart failure.

More than a dozen residents were found to have died of apoplexy, a diagnosis once used for a variety of ills.

Eugene Lawrence, a North Carolina farmer, died in 1933. Cause of death was pellagra, a disease brought on by a diet lacking in Vitamin B. Wife Zola survived.

## **Poverty as an identity**

People's occupations, when listed, ranged from tobacconist to farmer, from show business to millwork. But more than 150 had their occupations listed simply as "inmate," or "inmate County Home."

"That was their identity, that they lived in the poorhouse," said Chuck Bolton, head of the history department at UNC-Greensboro, whose specialty is Southern history. "The local community saw these people as needing to be taken care of and part of that was seeing that they were buried."

The practice of having each county oversee a home for its poor people stems from the tradition of English poor law, and was more formally instituted in North Carolina when the state rewrote its constitution after the Civil War, said Andrew Dobelstein, a professor emeritus of social welfare and public policy at UNC-Chapel Hill.

"These homes played a very important part in the social welfare history of the United States," Dobelstein said. "That was the major form of poor relief."

Unfortunately, he said, the homes also developed a reputation as dumping grounds for people with all sorts of troubles. "If they were mentally ill, or physically ill, it didn't matter," he said.

William Fernell was a single man from Raleigh who died in 1918 at age 56 after receiving medical care for nine months. The official cause of death: insanity.

## **A 'mixed population'**

The lumping together of poor, old, sick, mentally ill and disabled people comes through plainly in the recently rediscovered documents. It also rings true to Lou Wilson, who lobbies the legislature for the long-term care industry from a background of knowledge: She grew up in the family that ran the Randolph County Home.

"When I moved to the county home when I was 13 years old, we had a very mixed population, people who were developmentally delayed, some who had mental illness, and a lot that was elderly, just like there is today," Wilson said.

## **'A step down'**

Among the residents of Wake County's home were people with familiar North Carolina names, Hinton and Chavis, Faison and Haywood.

But it's difficult to track relationships to present-day families. Someone who wound up in the county home was, after all, almost by definition a person with no one else to care for him or her.

Retired historian Fannie Memory Mitchell, 85, of Raleigh recalls visiting a family friend who entered the Wake County Home after her money for a private nursing home ran out. "You knew it was a step down," Mitchell said. "But she took it in stride and made the best of her situation. She was one of the people who still had a mind."

Mitchell recalls conditions at the county home during the 1950s as not too bad, despite sparse furnishing and plain food.

"It was nothing luxurious, but I think they got reasonable care," she said.

Lobbyist Wilson, pushing as always to get more money for the state's assisted-living centers, says the old county homes served residents better in some ways than current facilities, which she said face mounds of regulations from the state and Medicaid. Medicaid costs billions annually in North Carolina, with major increases in the 65-plus population forecast by 2030.

"If we don't do something, I see us going back to county homes," Wilson said, recalling the homes' community support and stable work force.

As North Carolina faces undeniable challenges in caring for its older population, the new wealth of information on those who lived and died in Wake County's poorhouse offers a compelling backdrop, historians said.

"It enriches the picture that we have of the way we treated people who were unable to look after themselves," Dobelstein said.

Nell Gray Mountford, who had traveled widely and enjoyed her extended family earlier in life, died in 1976 at the Wake County Home. A few family members and friends came to her funeral in the home's nearby plot, but no one placed a marker on her grave.

News researchers Denise Jones and Lamara Williams contributed to this report.

## **What's ahead for the Wake County Home Cemetery**

From 1915 until 1976, Wake County ran its Home for the Aged and Infirm on Whitaker Mill Road. The building now houses a senior center and offices.

The county will soon be asked to take notice of the unmarked county-owned plot near Five Points. It contains nearly 300 bodies.

Mike Aull, the county property officer, will ask Wake commissioners next month to recognize the cemetery formally.

Commissioners could approve a single, donated monument to acknowledge the cemetery's history and honor the hundreds buried in it.

## **The back story**

Thomas Goldsmith first reported on the Wake County poorhouse's cemetery in December. While working on a story about a senior center on Whitaker Mill, he heard a vague report that there was a graveyard on county property nearby. Numerous documents and interviews later, he learned that Wake County had buried hundreds of poor and older people in the cemetery for decades, but had placed no marker or other recognition on the site. Goldsmith's story in December sparked public and county reaction, as well as a private citizen's offer to place a marker at the cemetery.

He also heard from people who wanted to know whether, perhaps, long lost relatives might be buried there.

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