

Stonemason Apprentices Restore Over 40 Gravestones in Rye's African-American Cemetery



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A World Monument Fund apprentice works to help restore a headstone in Rye's African American Cemetery in Rye, NY. Graduates of World Monuments Fund's (WMF) Bridge to Crafts Careers (B2CC) program at The Woodlawn Cemetery & Conservancy in the Bronx recently brought their stonemasonry skills to rehabilitating damaged grave markers at the African-American Cemetery in Rye.

Established in 1860, Rye's African-American Cemetery is located within Greenwood Union Cemetery and is home to veterans from each of America's armed conflicts from the Civil War through World War II. Among the cemetery's notable residents are Samuel Bell, a soldier in one of the first black military units of the Union Army, and World War I veteran Francis M. Husted with the 370th Colored Regiment, the only unit in the U.S. Army with a full complement of African American officers from colonel to lieutenant. The site closed in 1964 with the desegregation of cemeteries and fell into a state of disrepair in the intervening years.



Restoration work at Rye's African-American Cemetery in June 2021 – before restoration (top) and after restoration (bottom).

Throughout a week in June, B2CC graduates, trained at Woodlawn Cemetery, assisted with unearthing or repairing more than 40 gravestones, many of which were buried or fractured. The work was made possible with support by the Jay Heritage Center and carried out in coordination with the Friends of the African-American Cemetery and the Town of Rye.



World Monument Fund apprentices work to help restore headstones in the Rye African American Cemetery in Rye, NY.

"The work that is being done this week is transformative. I have visited the site twice and each time I was amazed at the amount of change that has occurred," said David Thomas, President of the Friends of the African-American Cemetery. "I hope that the interns and the crew from Woodlawn are enjoying the results as much as I am. I could not be more pleased and grateful."

"The Town of Rye has made a firm and continuing commitment to a policy of practicing respect for diversity and inclusion. Bringing Bridge to Crafts Careers to our historic African-American Cemetery represents the perfect coming together of this mission. We are delighted and grateful to collaborate with our partners; an effort that has resulted in the restoration of a great many of the headstones that mark the graves here," said Rye Town Supervisor Gary Zuckerman.

B2CC was established in 2015 to provide underserved and underrepresented young adults in the New York City area hands-on technical training with the opportunity for placement in a stable career. The work completed is a modest but important step in bringing much-needed resources to historic cemeteries and burial grounds of African American communities.

With assistance from local social services agencies such as The Door and Opportunities for a Better Tomorrow, B2CC has an 80% job-placement rate among graduates. After finishing the program, participants are encouraged to take the apprenticeship exam for the Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers Local 1 Union. Those who pass are offered a three-year, paid apprenticeship that provides an hourly wage of \$26.36 plus benefits and can lead to long-term employment. Roughly 20% of B2CC graduates are accepted as union apprentices upon completion. Last fall, B2CC expanded its training offerings to historic landscape preservation in partnership with the Woodlawn Conservancy, The Door, the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development, and the Davey Tree Expert Company.

1 of 6



World Monument Fund apprentices work to help restore headstones in the Rye African American Cemetery in Rye, NY. Restoration work at Rye's African-American Cemetery in June 2021 - 1