

Quest to Solve Hammond Mystery Nears Answer



Photo by Lauren Langlois

Large limbs of the Hammond Oak stretch out over the graves of city founder Peter Hammond, members of his family and an unnamed slave who researchers are working to identify.

The identity of a slave buried with Peter Hammond has remained a mystery for generations, but researchers have found a name they believe could be his.

Hammond Historic District Commission is facilitating a research project into the identity of the slave, a project that is expected to be an ongoing endeavor. They have found the name Gaston in reference to the unnamed person who has never been properly remembered.

Researchers are working to confirm what they have found so far by gathering more evidence. Commission Director Leah Solomon said it is important that the project rests on facts, so they can build an accurate and full picture of him.

Once more is known, the city will replace the current grave marker with one that respectfully remembers him, she said.

The graveyard where the unnamed slave is buried is about a block east of Hammond City Hall on East Charles Street in a quiet residential neighborhood. In front of the site is a sign that mentions him only in reference to the family that owned him.

The site is anchored by an impressive tree, the Hammond Oak, that is surrounded by graves of the Hammonds. A stone near the fence that surrounds the graveyard marks his grave with the words "Unnamed Slave Boy."

The front sign states "Under this oak is buried Peter Hammond, of Sweden, who founded Hammond, La., about 1818. Nearby are the graves of his wife, three

daughters, and a favorite slave boy." The sign was erected by the Louisiana Department of Commerce and Industry in 1950.

The 1850 slave schedule says Peter Hammond had three male slaves. The schedule gives their ages as 5, 24 and 28. Based on this and the fact that he may have died in the early 1860s, Gaston could possibly have been 15, 34 or 38 when he died, researchers speculate.

Researchers say more work needs to happen to resurrect this person who has remained in the shadows for so long. It will be a long journey to answer the question of who was the unnamed slave.

They want to reach out to descendants of the Hammond family and scour through church records to see if they can find a possible baptism for him or some other documentation. Another source they hope to find is Hammond family correspondences and diaries that may talk in detail about him.

Researchers want to spread the word far and wide so that anyone with more information can come forward and help solve this historic puzzle. People who wish to help out with this project should contact the district at (985) 277-5684.

The district and stakeholders in the project are planning a memorial service on All Saints Day, Nov. 1, at noon. It will be open to anyone wanting to remember him properly. Participants will lay down flowers and wreaths at his grave and then have a discussion on the ongoing project.