History of B'nai Israel Cemetery

The untimely death of a 20-year-old boy and a disputed lottery played major roles in the 144-year history of B'nai Israel Cemetery, believed to be the oldest separate Jewish cemetery in Florida.

When young Abraham Pinkussohn died on August 27, 1871, he was buried in a plot of ground east of downtown, along a "cow path some distance from the nearest dirt road," according to the late Samuel Proctor, official historian of the Gainesville Jewish community. Not until five months later, in January 1872, did the founders of the cemetery, Pincus Pinkussohn and Gerson Joseph, obtain a deed for the one acre purchased for $20 from Daniel G. Anderson of South Carolina, and give it the name "Gainesville Jewish Cemetery."

In 1871, there were no more than two dozen Jews living in Gainesville, and by 1880 half of them had already departed. (The Pinkussohn family of mother, father and 10 surviving children had moved back to Savannah and do not appear on the 1880 census.)

Jewish cemeteries in the South almost always pre-dated Jewish congregations, and sometimes the cemeteries continued to exist separately from the official Jewish congregation itself. That was also the case in Gainesville. B'nai Israel Congregation was officially incorporated on Dec. 22, 1921. However, the Gainesville Jewish Cemetery had separate trustees until Oct. 10, 1946, 25 years later, when the district court officially transferred its supervision to the trustees of B'nai Israel.

At the time of B'nai Israel's incorporation in 1921, a local funeral home donated a cornerstone for the future synagogue building. The "cornerstone" turned out to be (what else?) a tombstone. It was decided to use the tombstone as a plaque naming all the trustees, with the order of names on the plaque determined by lottery. One trustee, Abraham Buns, objected to his low placement in the lottery (he charged "fraud" was involved in the process) and withdrew from the congregation.

Buns, and his wife, Villa, established a parallel congregation consisting of university students who partook of kosher meals at the Buns home. The Buns had managed the Gainesville Jewish Cemetery since 1919, and continued to do so until Mr. Buns' death in 1943. After its transfer to B'nai Israel, prominent members of the community, notably the Lichter, Rudderman and Robbins families, served as chairs of the Cemetery Committee. When Mrs. Buns died in 1960, she left the bulk of her estate, about $60,000, to the cemetery

As the Gainesville Jewish population increased, the cemetery began to fill up, even though a second Jewish cemetery was opened by Congregation Shir Shalom in1990, as a section of Forest-Meadows Cemetery on NW 39th Avenue. Thanks to the foresight of Cemetery Committee Chair Florence Vendeland and B'nai Israel Sisterhood, money was raised in the late 1990s to triple the size of B'nai Israel Cemetery, including almost one-half of the block south of the current Cemetery. The Emmer, Friedlaender and Levy families provided significant gifts for new walls, gates and beautification. Some 340 families contributed $36,000 in 2009-10 to build Gainesville's only Holocaust Memorial in the Cemetery.

Some 300 persons are now buried in the cemetery, which is financed totally by gifts to the congregation's Cemetery Beautification Fund and the sale of plots to members and non-members. The original land at the "end of a cow path" is now a small oasis at the very busy intersection of University Avenue and Williston Road, its beauty a source of comfort and pride to members of the congregation.

Current members of the Cemetery Committee are: Ralph Lowenstein, chair; Barry Baumstein, Stuart Cullen, Norman Levy, Gary Miller, Sid Pactor, Jaquie Resnick, Marvin Slott and Florence Vendeland.

There has always been concern that the only piece of land not owned by the Congregation – one-third acre and a former grocery store at the corner of E. University Avenue and SE 12th Street – would someday be utilized in such a way as to affect the dignity of the Cemetery and Holocaust Memorial.   Over the years, it has been a bar, churches and nursery schools. The owners were seeking more than $400,000. In late 2014, the building and land suddenly came on the market at an asking price of $152,500. Some 194 members of Congregation, at a special meeting on Sunday, Nov. 16, 2014, voted unanimously to buy the property at that price and incur a debt of $120,000 to Florida Citizens Bank and $37,000 to the Ethel and Marvin Levy Cemetery Beautification Endowment Fund at Congregation B'nai Israel.

The Cemetery Committee was charged with raising the money to repay the bank, the Levy fund, and the cost of razing the building and landscaping the property – estimated to be a total cost of $250,000. Provisos were that there would be solicitation by mail only, the fund-raising campaign would be completed by Dec. 31, 2015, and all payments to the campaign would be completed by Dec. 31, 2017.

Packets describing the plans for enlargement of the cemetery, and requesting the return of pledges or an interest in buying plots have been in the hands of all members of the Congregation since the first week of May. As of June 1, most members have not returned the response sheet in the envelope provided.

Ralph Lowenstein, chair of the campaign, requests that all members who are going to participate in this campaign please return their response sheets as soon as possible.   The first payment need not be made until December 31, 2015, if that is the desire of the donor, but Ralph needs to know where there is interest and where there is no interest.   If response sheets are not returned by June 30, he must assume there is no interest in participation.

For those who want to see the present Cemetery or the property being purchased at the corner of E. University Avenue, the gates of the Cemetery will be open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. every Sunday from now to the remainder of 2015.   Otherwise, the correct number on all the combination locks is 1818 – double *chai*.